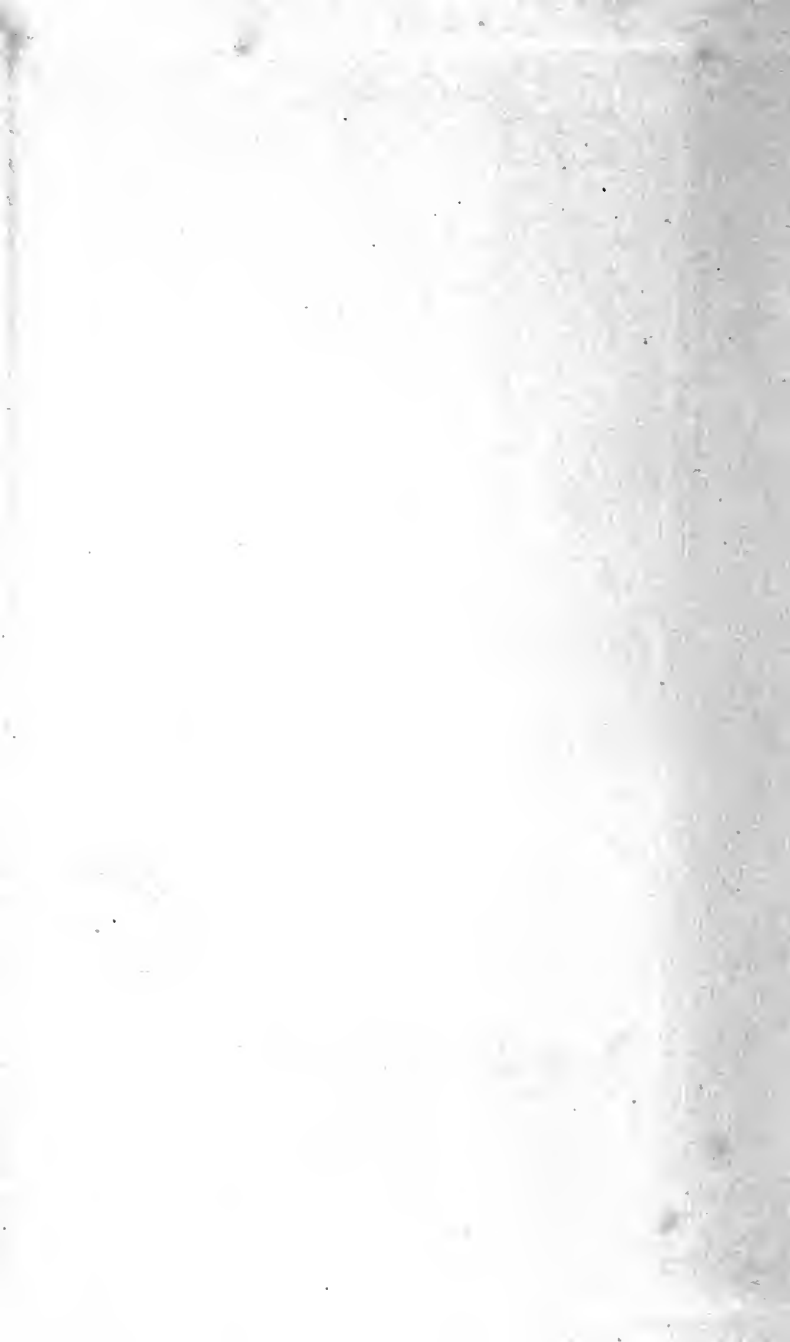



YELLOWLEAF
SACHA GREGORY





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Yellowleaf

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Yellowleaf

By
Sacha Gregory



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YELLOWLEAF

CHAPTER I

I

LADY MARY DAMPIERRE sat by the fire in the low, irregular shaped drawing-room of Yellowleaf, her house in St. John's Wood.

She was tired, and had pushed away the great embroidery-frame that seemed almost as much a part of her as did the luxurious, complicated wheel-chair, out of which her grandchildren, Jim and Picotee, could not remember having seen her.

Against the black velvet cushion at her back her little old face looked almost like that of a statue, but it was the colour of the golden marble loved by the Greek sculptors in the golden period of Athens. Her eyes, her commanding, glowing eyes, were closed, thus making prominent the chief peculiarity of her striking old face—the extreme length and silkiness of her lashes.

The firelight, flickering over her, while it revealed the thousand lines and wrinkles in her delicate skin, showed also, by the unbroken, unindented sweep of her jaw-bone from chin to ear, that her teeth, the roots at least, were still there. One small shrivelled hand lay on each arm of the chair, and many diamonds glittered on them, and one magnificent ruby. In the

November dusk which still crept in at the windows, and the strong, warm light of the log-fire, rising and falling almost rhythmically in the still air, this old woman, in her perfect immobility, made a singular picture, and, when a second human being entered the room and padded noiselessly across the uneven floor, he added to, rather than detracted from, the odd, dramatic quality of the picture.

This second person, who, drew up, unheeded by the old lady, at the opposite side of the fireplace, had seen nearly as many years as she herself, and his peculiarly thick and vital-looking hair was as white as her own. This old man was Mrs. James Dampierre's butler, Bruno Anselmi, who had been first in the old lady's service, then in that of her son, Captain Jim, and was now, six years after the young man's death, in his widow's. Man and boy, Bruno had obeyed and admired Lady Mary over fifty years.

One of the ample Georgian windows was behind the old lady's chair, and between it and her stood a six-foot Cordova leather screen, three-ply and solid. This screen, curving round the wheel-chair, formed what was known to the family as "Grandmother's," and to the servants, the "Old Lady's," Corner; asked suddenly to write down the phrase, the chances are that, out of the ten members of the household, at least eight would have given the word a capital C, for the corner had become, during the ten years of Lady Mary's inability to move, something between a household shrine and a market-place. Everything that happened at Yellowleaf happened in this corner, and now

old Bruno, as he stood there, small, narrow-shouldered, of an almost Saracen-like bronziness of complexion, knew himself to be on the point of stage-managing another important event.

Round the corner an invisible clock ticked weightily; a taxi sped past the house swiftly through greasy mud; upstairs a door slammed; and these things made the silence that he had come to break seem to the old man something palpable and solid.

With the sensitiveness to impression of his race, and the loyalty and self-dedication to the family he served characteristic of all Latin countries, he shivered suddenly as he stood there looking at his sleeping mistress.

She was resting, and her mind was at peace; her perilously nearly worn-out old heart was, he knew, beating quietly under the beautiful lace crossed over her still shapely breast; and he must waken her to give to her tidings that he knew to be very bad. For a moment it seemed almost impossible for him to speak; then, with an effort, he opened his mouth, the firelight showing the edges of his exquisitely white teeth, and was about to say her name when the old lady opened her eyes and looked at him.

"Is it Mr. Aghassy?" she asked quietly in Italian.

And in the same language he answered; "Yes, Your Excellency."

"Where is Mrs. Dampierre?"

"Mrs. Dampierre has not come in. She's at the Zoo with the children."

The old lady drew herself up in her chair, and

swung the great embroidery-frame into its place over her lap.

"Turn on the light behind me," she said; "and show Mr. Aghassy in."

The old man obeyed and the light burst out, leaving her far in the shadow of the screen, but lying like brilliant sunlight on the chair opposite her. As he came round from behind the screen, he went on in a grieved, worried voice: "He has brought lilies again." He used the word *mughetti*—lilies of the valley.

The old lady nodded. "I know. Show him in now, and bring in tea."

A moment later from around the corner came a flood of light and sound of footsteps, and Jacques Aghassy the pianist was bowing, rather lower than usual, to the old lady behind her palisade of wood, and canvas, and gay-coloured silks.

"How do you do, Mr. Aghassy?" she began, pointing to the chair. "What beautiful lilies!"

She spoke in French and, as the man obeyed her and sat down, his face darkened with an annoyance that was very near anger.

"I brought the lilies for Mrs. Dampierre," he answered in English, holding them in his hand, instead of putting them on the table near his chair.

"My daughter is at the Zoological Gardens with her children," Lady Mary went on with an amiable smile, threading her needle with a long bit of crimson silk. Again she spoke in French, and, once more, Aghassy answered without comment in English.

"I had not the pleasure of knowing that your daughter, Mrs. Pugh-Garnett, was in town."

His voice was very suave, but the old lady perceived with malicious enjoyment that his irritation was increasing, as she would have expressed it, by "leaps and bounds."

"My daughter, Mrs. Pugh-Garnett, is *not* in town," she replied, her voice expressing the amiable wish to give him all the information he might wish about the movements of the different members of her family. "I was speaking of my daughter, Mrs. Dampierre."

He raised his eyebrows, which were beautifully marked and extended rather far down his temples.

She laughed, something more like dimples than wrinkles breaking the contour of her old cheeks.

"An unfriendly, cold-worded phrase, 'in-law.' If my son had married a woman I could not love, I should not have called her daughter at all. I should have spoken of her as 'my son's wife.'"

There was a pause, during which the two looked at each other with strong dislike, but the unwilling respect that every strong soul feels for a worthy antagonist.

"Mr. Aghassy," Lady Mary began suddenly, but with a curious effect of not speaking abruptly. "I am an old woman, and I am very outspoken."

Her French was perfect, but after a pause, during which he laid his flowers gently on the table, he answered, in English once more:

"I am not an old man, and I am not outspoken. However, I am entirely at the disposal of Lady Mary Dampierre. I listen."

She laughed, and her little teeth gleamed.

"And *that*, you think," she said gently, "is English!—'I am at the disposal of Lady Mary Dampierre. I listen'!"

Aghassy flushed, and leaning forward, his elbows on his knees, rolled his dogskin gloves carefully together before he answered.

"It amuses you," he returned, "to pretend that I am not English, but that is of small consequence. I have come to tell you that I am once more going to ask your daughter-in-law, Mrs. James Dampierre, to marry me."

There was another silence, at the end of which the soft shuffling footsteps of Bruno came down the length of the room, and the old man appeared, carrying the tea-tray.

Lady Mary nodded.

"I know," she returned. "She will not marry you." She spoke as if they were still quite alone, but Aghassy shot an uneasy glance at the quietly working butler.

"She has refused you twice, you know," the old lady went on, smiling as her eyes followed his, "and I am pretty sure—as well as very hopeful—that she will again! There are all sorts of things against you. Against," she added hastily, "your chance, I mean."

"Yes?"

"Yes. For one thing, her son doesn't like you. For another, her daughter doesn't like you——"

"And for another thing," he put in with a short laugh, "you do not like me. You have never concealed your feelings."

"I have never tried to."

Bruno, having drawn aside the embroidery frame, pushed the ready tea-table in front of her, and adjusted her chair to its uses.

Still speaking French, she inquired politely as to her guest's tastes in the matter of tea, and, when she had poured out a cup for herself, neither of them spoke for what seemed a long time. Then Aghassy, setting down his cup, broke the silence.

"There is, on my side," he began slowly, "one factor that you have overlooked."

"No, I have not. You mean the piano."

He bowed, the firelight glancing over his well-brilliantined, smoothly brushed black hair.

"Yes," he said, almost in a whisper, and his low, almost husky voice was very sweet, "the piano is my friend."

The day had come to an end now. The windows, still uncovered, hardly showed against the darkness of the far-off parts of the room. The wind was rising, and little gusts of rain were blowing against the glass. Lady Mary watched the fire for a moment, as it answered to the voice of the storm and threw itself about in a nervous, spasmodic way.

"My daughter will soon be coming in," she said at length, "and she will see you in her morning-room and tell you her decision. If by any chance she surprises and distresses me by accepting you, you must bear in mind this one thing; she's a gentle, delicate, impressionable woman, and when the hour comes when you wish to bully her, you will find it easy to do so; but

you will not find it easy to bully me, and, until I die, I shall stay with her."

She had been watching his face closely as she spoke, and it seemed to her that it was more like that of a lynx than ever, in the immobility and lack of expression that he was forcing it to.

It was a broad face, curiously flattened, almost Kalmuck, seen from the front. The eyes, which had a decided upward slant, were very long and narrow, and of a remarkably light, almost jade green in colour; the lashes were short and thick, and the whole eye-ball had a singular look as though they were less the eyes of a human being than highly polished bits of precious marble. They were remarkable eyes, and many people thought them beautiful, but Lady Mary was right in considering them inhuman-looking. Above the broad, smooth, dark eyebrows the beautifully modelled forehead looked incongruous, for it was the forehead of an idealist and poet.

Now, as she watched him, he turned suddenly at the sound of some slight noise round the corner of the room, and his curiously shaped head, showing against the light, struck her that he was indeed wonderfully feline; but, when he turned, the noise having grown louder, and unmistakably made itself known to be that of people arriving in the front hall, he was smiling, and even his inexorable old judge in the wheel-chair could not see that strange, wistful, almost child-like smile without being vaguely, unwillingly touched by it.

Neither of them spoke until the footsteps of an invisibly approaching newcomer had come up the whole

length of the room and turned the corner. Then he rose, dropping his body and arms forward in his odd, characteristic bow.

II

Lily Dampierre stood in front of a great mass of white lilac heaped in a Chinese bowl on a black-wood stand.

She wore a dark coat and skirt and a close-fitting hat of silk beaver, like a man's. Her small, pale face looked less white than usual, and her child-like lips, smooth and red, were parted eagerly.

"Oh, Mr. Aghassy," she said, "I am so glad you are back."

She was very small, very delicate-looking, and in her large, dark blue eyes was a look not often seen after childhood is over. She looked what she was—a simple, unintellectual, sincere, grown-up child—and her pleasure in seeing him was so obvious that, do what he would, the man could not keep triumph out of his face.

Lady Mary watched them as they talked. Lily had taken the children to Rumpelmayer's for tea, and Jimmy had eaten seven scones, and Picotee had upset the cream-jug—"Only," Mrs. Dampierre added vaguely, "it was only milk, so it didn't much matter,"—

"And how was Paris?" she added eagerly, taking off her jacket—for the room was warm—and arranging the crushed folds of her filmy batiste blouse with her little unberinged hands.

Aghassy explained briefly and with a certain dignity

that his concert had been a success, that he was giving three in London almost at once, and that he had discovered a new Polish composer whose music, written on a new scale and breaking all the known rules of composition, was sure to rouse tremendous interest in London.

When they got to this point they had been talking for about ten minutes, and he rose.

"I will play to you," he said. She clasped her hands and flushed with pleasure, and, without a word, led the way round the corner to the far end of the room where the piano stood all alone, like some ungainly god, on a platform.

Lady Mary heard the sound of the piano being opened and the chair being moved, and then, to her surprise, her daughter-in-law came pattering back to her and sat down in the arm-chair vacated by the pianist.

"He told me to sit here," the young woman declared, and then for a long time no one spoke, and music filled the room—and, it was plain, the world, for the younger of the two listeners.

Lady Mary knew that it was not mere music she was listening to. It was a wooing, and, much as she disliked the man, she could not but admit that it was a brave and potent wooing.

Remembering, as she listened, his great, square-tipped fingers and his heavy wrists, she could hardly believe that it was he who was playing, so delicate, so tender was his touch.

III

It struck her that her daughter-in-law's sensitive face was like a pool of water, helplessly open to the reflection of anything that passed over it. The last few years, since the sudden blotting out of the rose-and-gold splendour of her short married life, had been grey and quiet years, a little sad perhaps, but full of peace, and her face had faithfully, unconsciously reflected them. Eight months ago, this man Aghassy had come, and his shadow—an oddly sinister shadow, it seemed to the old woman—had ruffled the quiet of the little pool, which, however, had settled down again after his departure for the continent eight weeks before. And now here he was back, weaving his spell at the piano, and the old woman's heart grew heavy, so heavy that she pressed her hand against it as she watched the effect of the music on the innocent little soul so dear to her.

Lily Dampierre was no musician herself. Her playing had never passed the schoolgirl stage, her small hands had no force, and her fingers dashed about with cheerful inaccuracy when she attempted to play; but she was that rare thing, particularly amongst women, a sincere, passionate lover of music. And it seemed to the old lady now, at this crisis, that it was a fatality that, unlike most women, she loved better the cool, logical voice of a piano than the emotional, senses-swaying one of the violin.

Lady Mary herself had once fallen deeply in love with Sarasate and his fiddle, but she never would have

envisaged him as a mere man apart from the exquisitely shaped little brown soul of him, as his violin seemed; and she could not understand that anyone could look on a piano as the soul of any man, however marvelously the man might play; and now here sat her little Lily, her delicate face flushed, her eyes, which, while they were not remarkable in shape, were unusual because they were neither grey nor light blue, but really almost violet in colour, fixed on the fire, seeing neither that nor anything else in her ecstasy of listening.

Thoughts of Trilby and Svengali passed through the old woman's mind, and she laughed at her own paucity of comparison, for she knew that her daughter-in-law was not of the sort to be hypnotized. If Lily married the man it would be not because he had acquired any uncanny hold over her, but because she had in her own quiet, dignified, reticent little way made up her mind that for some reason or another she ought to do it.

The music by now had quieted down; it no longer reminded the old watcher of forked lightning among August mountain-peaks; it was as if the man were laying a broad, easy road for the feet of the little woman he wanted to come to him by; calm, reasonable, everyday, domestic music it was, and its effect was seen in Mrs. Dampierre's face, to which a quiet little smile came as she turned her head towards her mother-in-law.

IV

Lady Mary was full of wisdom, but she could not forbear from asking a question, and, being very direct, she put it into few words:

“What are you going to say to him?”

Lily's frankness was that of a child, instinctive, unconsidered, without alternative; Lady Mary's was a composite quality, for, although she had always been truthful, she had not passed through that most difficult period—early middle-age—without occasionally succumbing to the facile ways of compromise, and from this temptation, had grown to be stronger every day that she lived her conviction that sincerity was not only the better way, but that any other way inevitably led to disaster.

Human beings so rarely are honest-minded in their dealings with each other that it was a peculiar hazard that had drawn these two women, each so inexorably honest, into the close relationship of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, and Lady Mary had often wondered that they had not modified each other's particular form of sincerity. The fact that they had not, she knew, spoke volumes for both their characters, and she was, perhaps, the only person in the world who realized that Mrs. James Dampierre's vague, amiable gentleness was the expression, not of weakness nor of lack of character, but of some considerable strength; and now, as the curious, tranquil luring of the music went on, the old lady waited for the answer to her question.

Lily Dampierre smiled at her mother-in-law—her little loving, rather insipid smile—and stroked her smooth, pale brown hair back from her temples with the palms of her hands in a way that was hers.

“I missed him, you know,” she said.

“I didn't know. You never told me.” And then

suddenly the old woman pressed her hand once more to her heart, more sharply this time, as if she felt an actual pain, for her daughter-in-law had flushed.

"Why should I tell you?" the younger woman answered with a kind of shy bravery. "I knew he'd come back."

And Lady Mary knew the game was up. Moreover, in her silence she paid an unwilling tribute to Aghassy's cleverness—shown in the selection of the music he had given them. A less clever man, she knew, would have played a certain excerpt from Wagner, and other music of an order quite different from that he had chosen. What he was offering Lily was, Lady Mary understood, quiet, and affection, and respect, and gratitude, and a continually eloquent piano.

When finally the man stopped his skilful appeal, the two women waited for him to come back to the Corner; but he did not, nor did he move, for there was no sound of a chair being pushed across bare boards.

Finally, it was Lady Mary who, with an irrepressible smile, broke the silence.

"You are to go to him there," she said. "He will wait till you do——"

Lily rose, and, coming to the wheel-chair, bent down and kissed the old woman very tenderly on her fragrant, withered cheek.

"He has been very lonely," she said. "It will be nice for him to have Picotee and Jim——"

CHAPTER II

I

At this time young Jimmy, now beginning to be called Jim, was thirteen, and Angela Mary Hildgarde, his sister, just eleven. A few mornings after their mother's acceptance of Jacques Aghassy the two children crept downstairs at seven, bent on the deed known as "killing the worm"—the worm being hunger, and killing it consisting in eating bread and butter and drinking milk in the dining-room.

They were not beautiful children. Jim was rather delicate-looking, with one shoulder higher than the other, and a shock of ugly, dead-leaf-coloured hair. His legs were abnormally thin, and his feet disproportionately large; but his merry little brown eyes held not only the twinkle belonging to all normal eyes of thirteen, but also a capacity for happiness, affection, and pain not usually found at his age.

Picotee, as she was called in memory of her first walk, when, at the age of eighteen months, she marched boldly away from her mother's side into a garden to fall in a helpless heap in a fragrant, bee-haunted bed of that old-fashioned flower, was a little taller than her brother, and weighed nearly a stone more than he; a broad, straight, sculpturally-built child, declared by her grandmother to look as if she had come off a medieval fountain. Her well-cut, rather large face had none of the wistful quality of her brother's, but

in some aspects she was startlingly like her dead father in looks, although plain. Little Jim it was who, a dozen times a day, brought pangs to his mother's and grandmother's heart by some unconscious gesture or trick of expression that almost unbearably recalled the man they had lost.

On this dark morning they came creeping downstairs, each one carrying a brilliantly polished brass candlestick with a lighted candle in it. They had their dressing-gowns on and wore slippers. Picotee's heavy, sleek black hair hung over her shoulders in two big pigtails.

"Bruno swore he'd leave out a tin of sardines for us," the little girl whispered, as they reached the floor and ran over to their right, to the dining-room, which was exactly opposite the drawing-room.

Jimmy grinned. "Dear old Bruno! he won't have forgotten. I say, Picotee, if Charles heard us he'd go for us."

Picotee switched on the light and blew out her candle before she answered. "He might go for us, but he'd be pretty certain to eat one of the sardines," she returned.

The room they had come into, the door of which they had carefully shut, was as beautiful as the drawing-room, in a different way, with its white panellings adorned with coloured clusters of fruit carved by a pupil of Inigo Jones; and the passing years had softened the white to the indescribable hue of old ivory just before it gets to be too yellow. Lattice-windows were set close together round two sides of the room,

and through these now the faintest greyness of dawn was visible. On the big dining-room table, which was one of the most beautiful things in the house, stood three large breakfast-trays ready to carry upstairs. Two of them were fitted out in the ordinary way with silver and porcelain, very beautiful of their kind; but on the third tray all the metal was beautifully chiselled brass, except the spoons, which were gold.

On this tray the porcelain was a dead white and of a peculiarly thick and glossy texture. This was Lady Mary's tray, one of her peculiarities being that she hated silver.

When James had lighted the fire, and the logs had caught in a promising way, Picotee set on the vacant end of the table their own little meal, arranged for them secretly, and against the strictest orders from her mother, by the old butler. Milk there was in a big yellow jug, and a pile of generously cut bread and butter, and, in a little glass dish, a dozen comfortable-looking sardines.

It was really very jolly there, early in the morning while everybody else slept. The two children felt like pirates, bandits, Elizabethan adventurers, and all kinds of other delightful things; and then as they ate they discussed, as children are never expected to do and almost always do, the affairs of their elders.

First they exchanged opinions on the subject of their second cousin, Charles Thorn, who lived in the house and was the nephew of their grandmother.

"Charles is not very pleased about this fellow Aghassy," Jimmy began. "And neither is grandmother."

Picotee crunched thoughtfully at her sardine, of which she would have scorned not to eat the backbone and what she called the "innards."

"I don't think you ought to call him a 'fellow,'" she answered. "If he's going to marry mother he'll be a kind of father to us, won't he?"

"Oh, damn! He shan't be my father. Besides, grandmother hates him. I'm not going to be nice to him."

"Don't you go and be a 'Jacky Showbeast,'" admonished the little girl, "Besides, I don't mind him much, only I wish he didn't want to marry us."

At this Jimmy burst out laughing—jeering, cackling, rather elfin laughter it was.

"Marry *us*! You don't think he wants to marry you, do you?"

At this scorn Picotee stiffened, and took on what her grandmother called her "monumental" look.

"We belong to mother and mother belongs to us, like that thing Charles was telling you the other day—you know, 'If A's B and B's C, then A's C,' isn't it?"

Jimmy melted into patronage, called her "a good child," and offered to reward her with a crown of parsley from the sardine-dish. Then he added more soberly: "You'll find that it's quite different from having a real father, all the same. It's all very well now, of course; he's nice to us; but he won't be after a while. Besides, how will you like having a lot of little brothers and sisters?"

Across the little girl's broad, smooth face crept a deep purplish flush. Jim saw this and knew that it

meant mischief, for his sister was of a particularly jealous nature.

"But still, perhaps there won't be any," he muttered kindly, "sometimes there aren't. Though I don't see why you'd mind so much. I wouldn't. Think of those jolly pink twins we saw in the park the other day with cheeks like strawberry-creams."

The dining-room clock struck half-past seven, answered a second later by the beautiful silver-voiced patriarch in the drawing-room reproving its sluggishness by announcing in an authoritative voice the three-quarters. Eight o'clock was getting-up time for the few who in that wisely arranged household did get up for breakfast.

Picotee poured out the remainder of the milk, dividing it with strict equity, and then settled down to drink hers in her characteristic, regular way.

A change had come over Jim's face; he suddenly looked very tired, faint shadows showing under his small eyes, and he sat staring before him, his hand resting on the table near his disregarded glass of milk. He was wool-gathering. Through his mind were running two shuttles: one of unbroken, childish ignorance and trust in the grown-up Powers-that-be, the other one of dawning doubt and independent judgment. In his loving heart he knew that his mother was always right, so it must be right that she should marry Jacques Aghassy; but on the other hand, he was beginning to know that everybody sometimes made a mistake, so was it not possible that his mother, his dear little "All Mine"—his secret name for her—

could this time fail in judgment? And, in the confusion of his mental fabric, still another shuttle darted unceasingly: his own instinctive, masculine distrust of the man who was to be his stepfather.

II

If the ghost of any Florentine gentleman of about 1460 had come into the Yellowleaf dining-room a few minutes later, and seen the big man in the blue dressing-gown who had just joined the children, he might have believed himself to be face to face with John Medici, son of Cosimo, the father of his country.

Charles Thorn's likeness to this unfortunate Giovanni was amazing, and many times had he received from friends in Florence a photograph of the bust of his prototype by Mino da Fiesole in the Bargello Museum. His broad, bony jaw with a dimple in the chin; his tragically set, kind mouth, straight, thin-lipped and tender; the long, melancholy nose, and too-far apart, narrow eyes under prominent but nearly hairless frontal bones, were so like those of Giovanni that no one who knew him and saw the bust could fail to be struck by it. It was an astonishing resemblance.

He was the son of Lady Mary's only sister, and, as her husband, Hubert Thorn, had had an Italian, though not a Florentine, grandmother, there may have been some very reasonable explanation for the likeness, although it is unusual for a type of face to persist in any family for over four hundred years. The Hapsburg chin, the Bourbon nose, are so extraordinary, so entirely grotesque, that they naturally would survive

the passage of time; but this face of Charles Thorn, rough-hewn, strong, unusual though it was, ugly though many people considered it, was neither grotesque nor hideous. Indeed, as he came into the dining-room where the two bandits sat over the remains of their lawless meal, the smile with which he greeted them was almost pathetically sweet and kind.

"Got you again, you two villains!" he said kissing Picotee and giving the boy a heavy clap on the shoulder. "I'll get your mother to give Bruno the sack, and then he'll starve in the gutter and it'll all be your fault."

Jim smiled absently, for his invisible shuttles were still busy, his milk still unfinished, though Picotee's glass was now balanced on the edge of her nose to help her pink tongue in its ambition of extricating from it its very ultimate drops of nourishment.

Thorn, who had come down for his own tray, sat down and lighted the little spirit-lamp under the kettle. He hated tea, and was a whole-hearted coffee man, and made his own coffee as he had been taught in the East.

"What are you mooning about, youngster?" he asked Jim, after a pause. The boy did not answer, but his sister did—a thing that happened very often.

"We have been talking about Mr. Aghassy and mother," she explained.

"Oh, I see. Well, you are going to be nice to him, and help your mother to be happy, I hope," Charles Thorn answered, his soft, deep voice very gentle. Then Jimmy looked up.

"Charles," he said slowly, as if they were exactly the same age, "do you like him?"

Thorn was a truthful man as a rule, perhaps more out of fastidiousness and a sense of beauty than from any deep morality, but he naturally lied now.

"My dear old man," he answered heartily, "of course I do. He's a delightful fellow, and one of the greatest pianists in the world."

Jimmy looked up, his left eyebrow crumpled higher than the other in the funny little way his mother loved.

"Come along, Pic," he said. "Barbara will be coming to wake us up in a minute. We'd better get back."

III

So, alone in the beautifully panelled room, where the firelight touched here and there a cluster of carved grapes, or the cheek of an apple glowing with colour; where the old ivory-coloured panels looked inches deep in the richness of their surface; where the drab, sad, autumn day peered on him through the latticed windows, sat Charles Thorn thinking about Lily Dampierre's engagement.

IV

On the morning of the wedding Bruno arose at six and went down the hill to the Church of St. Amadeo. The old man was unhappy, therefore naturally, sanely, he went to church. It happened to be a dreadfully dark morning, and the small church was nearly as dark as it must have been at midnight. Crossing himself with holy water, the old servant knelt for a moment before the statue of Our Lady of Sorrows and then went and knelt before the small altar to the left

of the high altar, above which was hung an ugly, badly drawn, badly painted, nobly conceived picture of the Annunciation of Our Lady. And this is what the old servant prayed: "O Most merciful God, I most humbly thank thee for all thy mercies unto me, for thy forbearance and long-suffering with me notwithstanding my many and grievous sins. (Dear God, I have been an abominable and vile old man in hating, as I have hated, the illustrious gentleman who to-day is to marry our illustrious and most excellent lady. There is something, O dear God and dearest and most understanding Our Lady, about the shape of his feet that I cannot stand, miserable worm that I am.) But you, O Our Dear Lady and Blessed St. Joseph, and above all my dear, intimate dear St. Bruno, you know what an ignorant, foolish old sinner I am, so forgive me out of your intimate mercies; and now most gracious Lord Jesus Christ, I come to confess, and I pray you grant me perfect contrition for my sins that I may attest them with the deepest sorrow of my heart.

"Teach me to deplore my sins—and they are many and bestial, and worthy of the most revolting punishments—and assist me by Thy Cross to declare them to Thy Vicar, the Priest, honestly and with a contrite heart; and so through the most gracious Lady Mary, Beloved Mother of Jesus Christ, Gracious Redeemer, obtain for me full remission of my sins and save my soul."

And then this old servant, in his honest examination of his conscience, found that he had not omitted morning or evening prayer; that he had not been

negligent in the discharge of his religious duties; that he had not spoken irreverently of good or holy things; but that he had not been zealous enough for God's honour, for justice, mercy, and truth; that he had not avoided all kinds of impurity and faithfully conquered evil thoughts, because being an old man, these things had passed him by. He found afterwards that, though he had not disobeyed his superiors, nor murmured against their authority, nor thought of them contemptuously—for Our Lord, St. Mary, and St. Joseph knew that only an absurd idiot of a man could do anything but respect old Lady Mary, Mrs. Jeem, and l'onorevole Carlo!—he had been forward and peevish at times. Moreover, he would not attempt to conceal from the kind and omniscient Jesue, Mary, and Joseph, and St. Bruno, the fact that he had been over-strict in reprimanding those under his care, that he had not borne patiently with their failings.

Then the old man, his poor knees aching from the contact with the icy stone floor, made his act of contrition and, after a few moments of silent and mighty prayerfulness, made his way to the confessional. Half an hour later it was a young old Bruno who left the church after communion, and trotted back up the hill with his little yellow dog, Polenta, at his heels. To all outward appearance he was a work-worn old man, but he felt himself to be young, strong, and innocent. He bore in his breast a heart as pure as that of a child. This heart, sweet and blooming, he took with him to the wedding of his old Excellency's young daughter, la Signora Lili, to Jacques Aghassy, the pianist.

CHAPTER III

I

ABOUT ten days after the wedding a dark brown brougham drawn by a splendidly matched pair of bays drew up at Yellowleaf, and an extremely fat old gentleman emerged from it with slow dexterity, opened the garden-door with a latchkey, and waddled with a certain ungainly dignity up the flagged path.

This was Lord Hainault, Lady Mary Dampierre's only brother. As Bruno peeled his long fur-lined coat off him, the two old men chatted together in a friendly way, and Bruno remarked that the Signor Lord had put on weight.

Lord Hainault nodded. "Yes, I have gained seven pounds since I got back from Greece. They cook everything in oil there, you know, and the wine is very sweet—delicious, too, though it tastes of resin. You are thinner, my friend," he added, examining the old servant in a kindly fashion. "I wonder if the flesh I put on has in some way or other been taken away from you?"

They laughed, and Bruno led the way to the drawing-room.

It was a bright day, and the four windows at this end of the room, that faced towards the road, were letting in a tide of pale and pleasant light, in which the little hollows and ridges of the ancient oak floor looked to be filled with clear water. The fire-place opposite

the door was ablaze with big logs, and there were flowers everywhere.

Whenever he got back to this old dower-house of his family, Lord Hainault was impressed afresh with the fact that he loved its drawing-room as he loved no other room in the world. There was in it not only the beauty of its queer, unusual shape and its many treasures, but a homely, gracious atmosphere of dignity and cosiness and peace that made a strong appeal to the wandering old man. Opposite the fireplace, wide-open glass doors led into a big conservatory, whence came a pleasant fragrance of well cared-for garden things.

As the two old men made their way to the left, on their way to Lady Mary's corner, she called out to them, and her voice was as fresh as that of a girl.

"Is that you, Stephen?"

Bruno turned and went back, pausing half-way to the door, and smiling broadly to himself at the sound of the hearty kiss the old brother and sister gave each other.

But when they were alone, Lady Mary did not call her brother Stephen, she called him "Dan," a nickname she had given him half a century before because of his size, huge even then. "Daniel Lambert" she had nicknamed him, when he was twenty, and Dan she still called him, though nobody knew why.

"And how's Greece?" she began, as he settled down into the chair opposite her and lit his cigarette.

Greece, it appeared, had been less perfect than usual. He had had ceaseless rains in the Peloponnesus, and his rheumatism had been bad; and now he asked in his

turn: "Tell me about yourselves and the wedding."

Lady Mary somehow, in the joy of seeing her brother after a long separation, had a queer air of being a young woman wearing the mask of an old one; but, at this question, her youth fled.

"Weddings are always beautiful," she answered. "I don't know that this one was any worse than usual, but I don't like him, Dan. There is something wrong."

"Tell me about it," persisted the old man, who was that most delightful of companions, a listener eager for detailed description.

So she began, speaking sometimes in French and sometimes in English, for their mother had been a Frenchwoman, and they had been brought up partly on a little old estate of hers in Anjou.

"Lily wore grey, of course. She was not the least excited or nervous. She might have been going to the British Museum as far as looks went. Bruno took me, and I was excited, and I did look very smart. Oh, Dan," she broke off, waving her little hands expressively; "I was so beautifully dressed! Picotee was bridesmaid, and looked very pretty in a periwinkle-coloured frock and fox furs. As to Jimmy, bless him, he was a dreadful blot on the beauty of the scene. His coat didn't fit him, and his hair stuck out worse than ever." Her face changed, and she spoke with strong vehemence. "He feels the same about Aghassy that I do—I mean, that he's wrong."

Lord Hainault grunted. "He's a magnificent pianist. He beats anybody I ever heard—yes, anybody, at that Bach concerto."

"I don't mind him much," the old man went on thoughtfully—"at least, he looks a manly chap with those great shoulders."

"His shoulders are all right, but his legs are too short, and," she added drily, going on with her embroidery, "did you ever notice the back of his neck?"

Lord Hainault had not noticed the back of Jack Aghassy's neck.

"Well, it's clumsily broad at the base, and goes straight up to his head behind the ears without a curve, and there is no hollow in the middle, and the hair grows high up and straight—the neck of a brute."

"Oh, get out!" laughed the old man. "Whoever heard of an animal whose hair grew high up on its neck? I'll tell you how I met him first, by the way, Mary: through Sylvester Martin, that secretary I had."

Lady Mary stuck her needle into the canvas and leaned forward in her chair. "Oh, the one who went out to South Africa. Did you? I didn't know that! You liked him, didn't you, Dan?—Martin, I mean."

"Yes. He was a capital chap, and as clever as they're made."

"You treated him confidentially, eh?"

Lord Hainault stared at her, his dark eyes looking puzzled.

"Of course I did; he was my private secretary and a gentleman. Why?"

But Lady Mary, instead of answering, went on telling him about the wedding, at which, it appears, the church had been bitterly cold, and, brightened only by the presence of three or four guests, about as cheerful-

looking as a mausoleum. Jim sneezed all through the ceremony, and, of course, had no pocket-handkerchief. Finally, Picotee lent him hers, and he forgot where he was and blew his nose so loud that the church echoed.

"Well, then we came home here and had lunch—or breakfast, I suppose I should say—and they went away; and that's all—except," she added, resuming her work, and bending over the intricate medieval pattern of her tapestry, "that he played for us before they left. That, you know, was rather odd," she went on briskly. "There were only ten of us. Maud came, and Arthur Hesketh, and Bill—by the way, Bill did your job very well, and gave her a delightful pair of old pearl earrings—and two friends of his—Aghassy's—Sir Abel and Lady Booth, rather nice people they were. She's Italian, and used to be a singer—a charming little woman with eyes too big for her face. Well, after lunch, he brought us all in here to my Corner. It was a pouring wet day, and the wind was tearing at the windows like blazes; and when he had made us all comfortable, the creature marched up by himself and opened the piano wide, and played. It was," old Lady Mary went on, "glorious. Of course, it's that, that's done it—with Lily, I mean. She wouldn't have looked at him but for his music."

"That's no discredit, my dear. There always is in everybody some one quality without which the other person never would have thought of them. Dear little Lily! Do you think she really cares for him, Moll?"

Lady Mary nodded. "Yes, I think she's given him, or rather that he has taken, everything Jim didn't carry away with him."

There was a pause, during which the old man dreamily watched the waving of the boughs through the long narrow windows set in over the mantel-piece.

"Where did they go?" he asked at last.

"To Cornwall. He wanted to take her abroad, but is having a big concert just after Christmas and has to get back. Did I tell you they were coming this afternoon?"

"No; but I say, Moll, you won't be able to stand the fellow practising in here. Playing is one thing, practising is quite another."

"Oh, he's not going to practise here. She has had the billiard-room changed into a study for him, and his own piano is in it. Go and take a look at it, and tell me what you think."

The old man hoisted himself out of his chair, and rolled cautiously to the hall-door at that end of the room. Just opposite to him was the library, and, to his right, behind the library, the billiard-room. It had been changed, even to the colours of its walls, which were now a deep cream, unrelieved by pictures, except for a large and very beautiful etching of the frowning Beethoven. The piano stood nearly in the middle and a new electric light installation over and beside it, caught the old man's eye. Besides the piano the room contained a large writing-table, looking out into the glass gallery at the back, and also lighted from the garden window; an old arm-chair with no cushion; and a rather shabby old green divan.

Lord Hainault liked the room, and somehow it surprised him in its bare austerity. He was not an

insular man—insular, after all, merely means ignorant—but he would not have given a pianist credit for such taste. Pushing open the French-windows, he got out into the wide, glass gallery that ran along the back of the house, and stood looking out at the broad garden in the midst of which, looking very desolate and chilly, was a marble figure of Poseidon, surrounded by some of his more fishy progeny, on an old fountain brought back many years ago from Greece by his grandfather. The old man was in a thoughtful mood; he had been very fond of James Dampierre, his sister's son, and he had loved his little wife, as, indeed, nearly everybody loved Lily. Her remarriage troubled him a little, not because her new husband was a musician of uncertain nationality and an unknown private career, but because Lady Mary's letters had told him, as much unconsciously as consciously, how much that shrewd old observer disliked the new member of the family.

Lord Hainault walked slowly along the gallery nearly to the end of it, and then turned to his right, crossed his sister's bedroom, and went back to her Corner.

"Well," she said, "what do you think of the room?"

"I like it. It's the room of a worker."

She laughed drily. "Oh, you wise old man! What a perceptive creature you are! How could a man play like that if he were not a worker? But it's not *that* side of him I am afraid of."

II

An hour later Mr. and Mrs. Jacques Aghassy were installed in their home, and four hours later dinner was over and the delightful drawing-room was alive with voices and laughter. It was a very odd thing, but Jacques Aghassy, the man with the lynx-eyes, seemed not to have come back; this man, Jacques, the deferential and devoted husband of delicate and pretty little Lily, seemed, even to his inexorable critic in the wheelchair, to be a new man.

He had brought laughter and an odd kind of innocent, domestic cheerfulness with him.

The white dining-room, with its enchantingly appetizing wreaths and clusters of richly coloured fruit, a room so large that the great table with its many wax candles looked like a little island in it, rang with laughter, the most deeply mirthful note of which belonged to the peak-faced Jimmy, whose bright little eyes held, as he looked at his new stepfather, a queer puzzled admiration that, in its turn, puzzled Lady Mary.

Taken all in all, they made a very good-looking party. Aghassy, who like very many temperamental people had hours, even days, of a plainness almost amounting to ugliness, was at his best. His muscular-looking, flexible red lips were full of pleasant curves; his narrow, almost pointed teeth constantly showing in an odd, belated kind of boyish laughter.

Lily sat in her own place at the head of the table. Opposite her near the door sat Lady Mary, with Jimmy on her right and Picotee on her left. Aghassy, by his own wish—indeed, by something that may almost be

called his own orders—sat on his wife's right, with his new stepdaughter on his right, Picotee being thus opposite her brother. On Lily's left sat Lord Hainault, who had dressed at the house, his clothes having been brought by Pyke, his valet.

Lord Hainault had been surprised, visibly surprised, by the table arrangements, but in two words Lily had quieted him.

"Mr. Aghassy," she said simply, then adding in an access of very pretty shyness, "I mean Jacques, wishes me to go on sitting where I have always sat, opposite Mamma."

And Aghassy had added in his pleasant, mellow voice, in the English that Lady Mary stigmatized as "too correct for an Englishman"; "I prefer to sit at Lily's right, Lord Hainault. It is honour enough for me and, moreover, I have never been able to see the happiness of sitting, separated by the length of a whole table from the woman for the love of whom one has given up one's liberty."

At this beautiful sentiment Picotee gave a loud cackle, upon which Jimmy, in his effort to quench her untimely mirth by a blow from a well-directed leg, nearly disappeared under the table.

Bruno, sad-eyed but benevolent, went about his duties, the duties in which he took a great and justifiable pride, with on his face an interest in the affairs of the family he served, that was according to the English criticism, almost criminally incorrect. And Lady Mary, enveloped in priceless lace over the supple velvet that her soul loved, said little and saw much.

It was plain to her that her dear Lily was happy, and when, at the end of dinner, everyone but herself had, according to their usual habit, gone back to the drawing-room the old woman looked up at Bruno who stood waiting to propel her chair back to her Corner, and smiled.

"Old friend," she said in Italian, "God or the gods seem to have decided that the Signora Lili is very happy. Signor Aghassy is in the nature of things the creator of that happiness. We must forget our prejudices and begin over."

The old man, spreading his short brown fingers in an understanding gesture, bowed.

"Eccellenze, si. I have understood. Also," he added with a calmness unachievable in the matter of religion in an Anglo-Saxon, "I have prayed. I do pray, and I will pray."

Answering her eyes, he placed himself behind her, and pushed her chair smoothly and gently down the room and out of the long hall to the left. There were dark, old family portraits hanging on the walls here, and only they knew the confidential talk between the old servant and the old mistress.

"Thank you, Bruno," she said, "I am glad you pray for them. Nobody can tell what will happen in the future, but that one thing in some way or other is bound always to be good—prayer."

Almost at the end of the lower passage, opposite the door of the library, and only a few yards away from the door of the new inmate's music-room, the old man turned the chair and wheeled it sharply across the bottom to the L of the drawing-room into the Corner.

III

On this the music began. Jimmy, who, according to his wont, sat on a cushion on the floor near his grandmother, had produced a sheet of paper and a stumpy pencil and begun to draw in a series of pulpy, bulbous lines the curves of his great-uncle, soon stopped working, and clutching his thin knees, on which he rested his chin, he, like the others listened to the music, the epithalamium of a modern pianist.

As a composer Jacques Aghassy was very second-rate, and knew it; as an adapter and weaver together of other men's musical ideas, he was unparalleled, and his brain, so quick, so agile, seemed as he went on to forget none of the beautiful musical dreams that other men had dreamt about beauty, and love, and firesides, and families. Long impeccable excerpts from Schumann, Schubert, Wagner, various Russians, Verdi, Granados, Sibelius, seemed to drip easily out of his sleeves to the tips of his strong brown fingers. He was the most conscientiously correct of interpreters; never by so much as a semi-tone did he take liberties with the masters he was interpreting, although he blended their compositions into a long, solid ribbon of smoothly unwinding melody.

Lady Mary, her soft dark eyes bent in turn on all the different faces of the little group round her chair, noticed with an impartial interest that the music was having an evenly distributed effect. Everyone, from Lord Hainault to young Picotee, was indisputably the happier for the gentle tide of sound that swept so beautifully through the old house; and, being a just

woman, she admitted this and told herself that she was glad.

When he had played for well over an hour, during which hardly a word had been spoken—it was understood that he could not and would not tolerate suggestions as to his musical programme—Aghassy struck the piano, giving it a great fierce bang, which, though dissonant, was held so cleverly by the pedals that it melted away into a pulsing, dreamful silence. Then, after a long pause, he marched quietly down the room and turned the corner.

“Lily,” he said. “It is late, I must rest.”

A few minutes later he and his wife had gone upstairs. Lord Hainault rose and looked at his sister, and was about to speak, when she half-closed her old eyes in a way that he knew meant an admonition to silence. He was not staying in the house, being the possessor of a nondescript-looking palace in Grosvenor Square, where, he always declared, he lived in two rooms, and which was known to the family as his cave; so presently he took his leave, escorted to the door by the children, who helped him into his waiting brougham with youthful, inhuman jests about the tightness of his fit in that vehicle.

When the horses had turned the corner, Jim and Picotee went back into the house, and made their way down the long passage towards the far drawing-room door, which passage they were encouraged to use rather than the long side of the drawing-room to which it lay parallel, because of the noisiness of their tread. It was their praiseworthy desire to say good-night to

their grandmother, but, when they reached her Corner, they found that the old Lady Mary had gone into her room, into which bower they were never encouraged to go. So they stood for a moment by the dying fire and exchanged immature convictions as to the success of their mother's marriage.

"I like him," Picotee declared, biting the end of her pigtail in the way stigmatized by her brother as revolting and cannibalistic. "He has dimples, and dear, funny flat green eyes, and he says I needn't try to learn the piano."

Jimmy gathered much wool before he answered, and, when he did speak, his words came slowly and lazily.

"I wish I loved music more," he said; "I mean, I wish I could get inside it."

"But you do like it, don't you? You listened all right."

The boy nodded. "I like it the way I like a rain-storm in the spring, from the inside with the window shut; what I'd like is to be a sparrow out in it, you know, with its feathers all separated so that it could get thoroughly wet"—on which, this philosopher and his sister went slowly up the broad, hard oaken stairs past their mother's room, which now so mysteriously had become Jacques Aghassy's room as well—the Mr. Aghassy who up to now had been only an occasional caller—and, after a short, cursory parting in the back-room at the top of the second flight of stairs, which was supposed to be their schoolroom, they parted for the night.

Their rooms were next each other and, as Jim opened his door, he turned, his irregular profile drawn closely against the light on it just turned on inside.

"I say, Picotee," he called softly, "it will be nice to have Charles back on Tuesday, won't it?"

He couldn't see Picotee, but he heard a voice, which organ indeed possessed thus far uncontrolled carrying qualities of an extraordinary kind.

"It will." After a pause the voice added, "Father Ambrose always *does* choose the most inconvenient times to die in."

CHAPTER IV

I

ONE day early in February, Charles Thorn and Jimmy sat in the schoolroom before an enormous fire having a history lesson. The boy had never been sent to school because of some weakness of the heart, which, in view of an hereditary malady of that romantic organ, it was considered advisable to safeguard.

Thorn, who was a scholar and a born solitary, had undertaken to teach the boy, who was a great favourite of his, and the lessons, although what may be called their shape was odd and unconventional, were fruitful in the knowledge that young Jimmy's rough-locked head seemed to contain.

Before the two, on the large, shabby old table, were spread several maps, one of Greece as a whole, one of Athens and a very detailed one of the Acropolis; while all round them on chairs, on the table, on the floor, lay open books, all pertaining in some way or other to that most enchanting of subjects, the "Golden Age" and its Pericles.

Jimmy, with a fountain-pen—one loaded with red ink, the other with black—in either hand, was drawing a map and uttering words of wisdom as to Pallas, Athene's olive-tree, and the Pelasgian War, and the rather doubtful character of Apollo, of that delightful caster of golden arrows. Charles Thorn was lounging

in a window, cuddling in his hand a disreputable, rat-tailed pipe, out of which he drew amazingly large clouds of strong tobacco smoke. They were both of them very fond of this delightful period of history, and on an easel near by stood a very good charcoal drawing of the Theseus from the east pediment of the Parthenon. This work was Jimmy's and showed, for all its crudity, an unusual knowledge of muscle and structure. On the mantelpiece was a half-eaten apple, a glass of malted milk, and an open Bible.

It was a mild day, and through the open window came a queer, cold smell of waking-up earth, and the sound of a bird singing. Young Jim worked for a while in silence, while his untutor-like tutor looked out of the window.

"I say," he said, "I believe I see a crocus, a yellow fellow, sou'-sou'-west of the fountain."

Jimmy dropped his pencil and joined him at the window. It was a crocus, bearing all the marvellous novelty of that annual period. It's odd, but one is always surprised by the first crocus, or the first violet, or the first cuckoo. The mere fact of the existence of crocuses and violets and cuckoos should lead every reasonable being to a calm recognition of the fact that there must come a first of every group, yet most human beings push a little cry of incredulity and rapture at their first seen example, so it will not very much surprise anybody that, on that February morning, Charles Thorn and Jimmy Dampierre should without compunction have planted their Theseus, Pericles, and the whole of Athens, to say nothing of those splendid fellows,

their neighbours, the Spartans, rush downstairs and out through the glass gallery and into the wet, unshorn grass, to jibber with delight over a small, anæmic, most weakly specimen of its family—a yellow crocus by the old fountain.

Thorn was not particularly fond of flowers, and Jimmy loved what he called smelly ones, even including the tuberose; but something in the air, that morn-brought them both to their knees with a beautiful disregard for clothes. And it was thus that Aghassy found them, when he came prowling soft-footed out of the music-room, his heavy shoulders bent, his head thrust forward with a bull-like air of clumsy exasperation, like that of some huge creature stung by a small pointed insect.

Like all musicians, he was a nervous creature; but, unlike most artists of all categories, he kept his moods and miseries decently to himself. But this morning he, too, was assailed by the demon of spring; its raw sadness struck him, and some momentarily insurmountable difficulty in the new Polish concerto he was studying had beaten him. He stood there at the edge of the glass gallery, in one of the open spaces made by the rolling back of a partition, the virginal young sun not pouring down on him, for the English sun never pours, but flowing, economically diluted, over his burly, coal-heaver-like figure. Looking down at the two idiots and the crocus he said: "Is that the morning star you have found?"

Thorn didn't move. His long back, under its gun-metal flannel jacket, stiffened slightly. Jimmy

whirled round on his hands and sat down, looking up at his stepfather with a wide grin. "Crocus," he said, wasting no words.

Aghassy made a little noise in his throat which he obviously expected to be taken for a laugh.

"Wonderful thing, a crocus! I should think a boy of your age, Jim, could find something more interesting to kneel to."

Then Thorn rose, and stood with his hands in his trousers pockets looking up over the boy's head at the other man.

"You forget, perhaps," he said very gently, "that the crocus is almost an English emblem. We are very fond of it, we English."

Then he turned and walked slowly straight down the broad, gravelly path towards the end of the garden.

Jimmy, who was more observant and less of a talker than most boys of his age, continued to stare up at his stepfather, and he saw the darkness rather than the colour, for Aghassy had very little colour in that strange face of his, drain away, leaving all but the lips of a queer, almost grey hue. Aghassy did not answer; Jimmy wished he would. Aghassy did not move; Jimmy wished he would. Aghassy's eyes half-closed, leaving only a slit of light between the lashes. A bird in the nobbly old apple-tree burst out into a little joyful song, a premature bird—for, as a matter of fact, it snowed next day—but Jim felt grateful to it, and wheeled about on his axis and watched it sing, glad to turn away from the queer green eyes at the top of the steps.

The bird sang on and on, the feathers parting over his bursting little throat, thus breaking the outline of his body against the sky; the crocus laughed in the grass; and, over his left shoulder, the boy could see the tall, slouching, broad-shouldered figure of his tutor standing at the extreme end of the garden, lighting a cigarette. For some seconds Jimmy did not move, but sat there watching the bird, and at the same time seeing Charles Thorn; wishing, with an intensity that made him almost ache, that, when he turned round, Aghassy would no longer be standing there, with his hands in the pockets of his shabby old velvet jacket.

Aghassy had said nothing. Thorn had said nothing. But the air was tense, stiffened with their hatred.

II

It so happened that Lady Mary became accessory after the fact to the scene of the crocus. She had been very unusually out of the house that morning, for Bruno had taken her to Bond Street to have her photograph taken, and she had just come home and been propelled majestically along the long hall towards her bedroom when Aghassy came back from the glass gallery, having come through sheer inadvertence into the hall instead of into the music-room. Bruno and Lady Mary, by way of celebrating the first mild day of the year, had called at Mr. Solomon's in Piccadilly, and expended two or three pounds on alien flowers—crimson and purple anemones; a huge bunch of friesias, each of which little horn, had it been capable of fair music, might have filled the world with lovely melody;

both kinds of violets, because Lady Mary preferred the dark ones while Bruno persisted in the superior charms of the paler ones, because their hearts were white; and, dominating, outsinging the lot of them with their yellow voices, a huge clump of feathery mimosa, that to-morrow would be dry twigs covered with ugly yellow balls, but that to-day, in their expensive youth, were a mass of fragrant, feathery, canary-coloured fluff.

Lady Mary and Bruno had both decorated themselves, Bruno's button-hole being a large, austere-looking, but sensuous-smelling gardenia, while the old lady's handsome furs were punctuated in the middle of her chest by some of the dark violets that Bruno did not admire.

Coming down the broad hall, the spring sun catching on the ancient gold frames of the family portraits that lined it, the old lady and the old servant made a fine and picturesque appearance. They were talking in the cheerful way prevailing in those lucky Latin countries, where servants are allowed to be human beings, and where such gracious permission does not turn them into antagonists; and, just as they reached the drawing-room door, they were met face to face by Aghassy, a wrathful, tenebrous Aghassy, his hands thrust into his jacket pockets, his narrow, glassy eyes drawn down, all the pleasant curves gone from his well-muscled lips.

At the sight of him the old Italian stopped short, and Lady Mary broke off in something she was saying in Italian. Aghassy was in one of those rages that cannot be reasoned about, and that cannot be inwardly

controlled because they have no possible reason; because their source lies deep in the soul of the unhappy wretch they control; because they are as strong as death, or love, or any other primal and terrible thing.

Valiant old Lady Mary gazed at him aghast, all her former feelings surging up in her again. With a little shiver she gathered her flowers closer to her, acknowledging to herself, as if she had uttered the words aloud, that she was afraid—afraid of this strange man, who was a great musician, who came of Heaven knew what race, who was her dear little daughter's husband.

He was not a very tall man, five-feet-ten at the outside, and his breadth and thickness of shoulder made him seem shorter than he was; but he seemed to tower at that moment over the very old woman in the wheel-chair, that old woman who could not escape from his terrifying presence because she was lame and helpless, and that old man who could not escape from his terrifying presence because he was a servant and a friend who must stick to his post.

The whole episode lasted not more than two minutes, and during it nobody spoke. At the end of the time Aghassy turned about sharply to his right, and, going into his music-room, closed the door with silky softness.

After a moment Bruno, passing the drawing-room door, turned to his right and wheeled his old mistress into her bedroom, where her maid was waiting for her.

Lady Mary said nothing. Bruno said nothing. But they parted with a new bond between them—the bond of a felt fear.

III

The question of young Jim's education was one of regular recurrence in the household. He had been very delicate as a child and, until he was ten, there had been no possibility of his being sent to school. It was at that age he was to have gone to prepare for Eton, but at the last moment he was laid low by rheumatic fever, which had left him extremely delicate. A few months later his father had died with an appalling suddenness that literally nearly killed his wife, who clung to the child in a way almost terrible in its intensity. It was at this time that Charles Thorn had come forward, and offered himself as tutor. None of the family could bear the idea of a strange young man living in the house, and, rightly or wrongly, Lily felt that the inborn tastes and peculiarities of every child needed, rather than the systematic crushing to which in this country they are usually subjected, a kind of wise guidance and sympathy.

So for four years the little boy had been under the constant care of Thorn, who found in himself an unsuspected fund of wise patience and the right, tactful kind of ridicule that helps every developing young mind. Passionately devoted to books himself, of a very comprehensive culture—and culture, after all, may perhaps be described as well-digested knowledge—a lonely man with few friends and no liking for indiscriminate companionship, his devotion to the child had grown to be the large interest in his life; and his devotion Jimmy returned in full. They were the best of friends, and it was believed after repeated tests in

the way of exams for different standards that, when his health was better, the boy would have no difficulty in entering Eton with credit.

It was a quiet household, that of Yellowleaf, behind its high, smoke-begrimed, London-coloured wall, its members being peculiarly sufficient to themselves and to each other for companionship and amusement. One of the chief advantages of living in a large house is that one is never subjected to the nervous irritation of too close companionship with its other inhabitants, and this old dower-house, built in the days when St. John's Wood was a King's chase, was so roomy, its very stairs and passages so ample, that sometimes half a day, would pass without the solitude-loving Thorn meeting his cousin's widow, any of the different people, chiefly women, who came in for the purpose of teaching the young Picotee, or even the servants.

Thorn had his own sitting-room as well as his bedroom. He had lived in the house ever since he was a boy, when his aunt, Lady Mary, had brought him home after his mother's death; and, because of his dislike for casual meetings and greetings, it had always been his custom to make use, not of the great staircase opposite the house-door, that branched off in antlers half-way up to twist round the gallery, but of a small, straight little flight that went up from the end of the hall just beyond Lady Mary's bedroom door, and thus nearly opposite the room that had formerly been the billiard-room and was now Aghassy's study. The fact that this little staircase was masked by a door almost invisible under the panelling was the cause, a few

months after Mrs. Dampierre's re-marriage, of very serious trouble, and a vital change in the household.

Since the wedding things had gone smoothly, Aghassy having proved unexpectedly homely and comfortable in his ways; and, what pleased Lady Mary still more, turning out to be not only not harsh, but even rather lenient with the children. Picotee frankly adored him, and Lady Mary could see no reason to doubt the sincerity of his affection for the handsome, troublesome child. Jim, though at first he had not liked his mother's husband, had, child-like, been won by the man's flattering weakness for him. Aghassy took some pains towards fulfilling the boy's wish to understand better the music that gave him such pleasure, and every day, at some time or other, he would call Jim into his bare, workman-like room and play to him; and he played so delightfully, choosing his selections with such unerring tact, that the boy's taste and appreciation steadily, and with no effort on his part, improved.

Clearly Aghassy had his points, and Lady Mary, delighted by the happiness reflected by these in her little daughter-in-law's face, was most eager to do him justice. On his part, his courtesy and consideration for the old lady were unfailing, and, at least in appearance, perfectly spontaneous; and he had none of the faults usually expected in men of strong artistic temperament. He seemed to have no rowdy or Bohemian friends, and kept very early hours; he was extremely moderate in matters of food and drink; his whole life, apparently, and his interests, were confined to his wife's

house, in which, moreover, he made no efforts of mastery, "treating himself," Lady Mary observed rather drily to her brother, "more like a distinguished guest than anything else."

In the matter of money Lady Mary had nothing to tell her brother, for the matter of money had simply never come up between Mrs. Aghassy and her husband. They knew that he was extremely well paid for his concerts, and he seemed always to be able to do or buy anything he liked; he dressed very well; and he had an attractive habit of bringing home from his daily walk queer little gifts for different members of the family, little gifts that, besides being unusual and charming, had the added attraction of not being of any pronounced value or remarkable for their cheapness. "The creature seems to have less to do with the market values of things," the old lady told Lord Hainault one day, "than anyone I have ever seen. If my life depended on it, I could not tell whether that bracelet he gave Picotee is worth ten shillings or ten pounds. He is full of queer little graces that keep me in a constant state of mental apology towards him."

The one person in the house who was perfectly unaffected by these little graces and qualities of the newcomer was Charles Thorn. His dislike for the man was so intense that whenever he could he dined away from home—at lunch-time Aghassy only very rarely appeared, having a weakness for a tray in his study at that hour. Lady Mary noticed this silent antagonism of her nephew for his cousin's widow's husband, and, after one or two efforts to draw him out on the ques-

tion, she gave it up in despair. For Charles Thorn would not talk when he did not want to, and about Aghassy his mouth was shut as close as an oyster-shell.

Lady Mary and Bruno had never forgotten their meeting in the hall with Aghassy that day in April, but neither of them ever spoke of it to anybody. It had been so queer, its tenseness amounting to horror, so inexplicable, that the very thought of words seemed to fly away out of their minds, and they could not remember any emotion—nothing but the fact that they had been afraid.

Jim, too, was silent about the scene over the crocus. He had not understood what Thorn had meant by his little speech about the crocus being the English emblem; but he had known that his friend had made the speech with a definite, bitter intention of hurting the other man, and that the other man's hurt had been swamped by a dark rage for which the child could not account at all. However, children forget easily, and six weeks after the scene Jimmy had forgotten all about it.

IV

Then came the Battle of the Staircase. It was a rainy day in June, and the day following Aghassy's last concert of the season. He had been to Paris a fortnight before, and given a concert with magnificent success at the Châtelet; but yesterday's concert at St. James's Hall had been in many ways the most successful of his whole career, and at dinner he had been, in his almost boyish delight and enthusiasm, so charming that even Bruno's dark eyes rested on him with a

softened expression as he waited. Bruno, moreover, had been to the concert, having been the gratified recipient of two excellent seats, the other of which he had filled with a dark brown compatriot whom he believed to be the best pastry-cook in London; and Bruno had told Lady Mary of all the wonderful things he had heard the people say as he and his friend left the hall. The enthusiasm had been tremendous, more than one of the evening papers declaring that even Paderewski and Busoni had never played certain numbers of the programme as Aghassy did.

Charles Thorn had dined at home at Lily's special request, and had made a great effort to play up to the occasion and to be as agreeable as he could. High on the crest of the wave of his happiness, Aghassy had met him half-way; and Lady Mary, as she dropped off to sleep, told herself with the whole-heartedness of a strong, generous nature that she had been an old fool, and wronged him. Possibly his efforts at geniality the night before had been too much for Thorn, or possibly he was not well, for it is undeniable that on that morning he was in a very bad temper.

Jimmy, who loathed noise and scenes, watched him narrowly as they went through their morning's work, for Charles's temper was something to be counted with, and its rare outbursts were dreaded by the high-strung child. However, things went pretty well, for Jimmy was full of tact, and he did his best to please his master. The brooding storm in Thorn's mind would probably have blown over as such storms often do, but for a piece of bad luck in connection with his Greek translation. It was nearly lunch-time and Jimmy was

very hungry, and, carelessly, pronounced *Zeus* as Zee-us. He knew better, Thorn knew he knew better, and on any other day would have let him off with a kindly jeer; but as it was, the storm broke. Thorn's temper, thoroughly roused, let him down with a bang, and he called the boy a fool and cursed himself for his idiocy in trying to teach such an idiotic young cub. Jimmy answered back, his irregular little face white with anger, and for a moment they faced each other, the family likeness, hardly to be noticed in ordinary times, standing out strongly; and then Jimmy poured oil on the flame. "You don't like Jacques," he said almost in an undertone but very distinctly, "I know you don't. You despise him because he's not an 'Honourable' like you, but he's worth a dozen of you. He's a great genius, and *he* would not swear and make a beast of himself to a kid like me."

Then Thorn stammered as he spoke, and that stammer was the worst sign of all with him.

"Who's Jacques?" he shouted. "What do you mean by calling that fellow Jacques? If you're so fond of him, why don't you call him father, and try to be like him? In the way you're going on, indeed, you've a jolly good chance of succeeding. Jacques! Pah! You make me sick. The man is not even white, he's a dirty Levantine. That's what he is."

And then young Jim struck him with all his puny strength in the face, and poor Thorn, beside himself, took up a light stick that was lying on the table and gave him a caning.

Now here is where the masked staircase comes in. It was a short staircase leading straight from this room

to the hall below, and, by bad luck, the lower door was ajar; by worse luck, Aghassy, leaving his room to go to the drawing-room to speak to Lady Mary, caught the sound of angry voices which he could not locate.

He had never noticed the door in the panelling, and for a moment he stood, bending forward in one of his queer, buffalo-like attitudes, listening. At that moment he caught sight of the break in the smoothness of the panelling, and opened the door. Jimmy was swearing like a young Turk, and, mixed with his voice, came the sound of somebody being beaten. For one moment Aghassy stood perfectly still, a curious slow smile creeping over his face, his green eyes shining brilliantly; and then he went padding softly upstairs, his slippered feet making no sound. He wrenched the cane out of Charles Thorn's hand before Thorn knew he was in the room, and he broke it over his knee and threw it out of the window. Then, one of his strong, wonderful hands on his stepson's shoulders, he made a speech.

"This won't do, Mr. Thorn," he said, quietly, looking up from under his eyebrows in his buffalo-like way. "I will not have my stepson beaten by you or anyone else. Now then, Jim, trot along and get yourself into shape before your mother sees you. We will not tell her about this."

Thorn, whose ebbing anger had left him weak and trembling, stared at him stupidly.

"It's all right, sir, it's all right," Jim put in eagerly, "it was really my fault. I struck him."

Aghassy was silent for a moment, and then said thoughtfully, his eyes fixed on Thorn's ravaged, sweat-

ing face: "What did he say to you to make you strike him?"

He so obviously had the upper hand, and poor Thorn, whose terrible temper the whole family had always regarded as much an hereditary affliction as gout or a big nose, drew a deep breath that was almost like a sob.

"Go downstairs, Jim," he said. "It's all right; I had no business to make a brute of myself like that, and I'm sorry."

Jim's old love for him came surging back, and he hated his friend's humiliation before the outsider, the newcomer, as much as did Thorn himself. "I say, Jacques," the boy went on nervously, "please don't say any more. A caning is nothing, you know, to us English."

"Us English!" thundered Aghassy, "ha! ha! You mean I am not English, I suppose. Never mind, my boy, I won't hurt him."

Then he added, looking full into Jim's eyes and speaking very softly in his deep, husky voice: "Go downstairs, now."

And Jim went.

V

Neither of the men ever referred to the scene to the child. He never knew the outcome of it. No one else in the house was told of it, and no one of them ever to his dying day forgot it. Jim often used to wonder which of the two men had been the most terrible, and never was able to make up his mind.

The next day Charles Thorn went abroad. He was gone two years.

CHAPTER V

I

*From the Lady Mary Dampierre to the Honourable
Charles Thorn. Hôtel Ritz, Paris.*

June 30.

MY DEAR CHARLES,

Your leaving so suddenly has so upset my poor old head that, if I ever stood on my heels, I should not know whether I was on it, or them. I still can hardly believe, my dear boy, that after all these years you have left poor Yellowleaf. You were a very little boy, very nobbly about the knees, and as freckled as a turkey's egg, when I brought you here, nearly forty years ago. How I used to cry when I washed you at night because your little toes were so exactly like your poor mother's! Do your little toes still twist in that ridiculous way, I wonder? I began to love you when you were three days old—all mouth and voice, like a young bird—and I love you still, though nowadays you are decidedly *not* all voice, my dear. It is odd that I of all women should live with two such silent creatures as you and Lily! Yet how different your silence is from hers. She is silent like a flower or a pearl, and you like a grim-edged oyster. Out upon you! Joking apart, Charles, I do think you ought to have told me why you had to go. I am very fond of you, and I shall miss you like fury; and I know, although you were about as communicative as a rat-

trap, that it is Aghassy's fault. I also know that poor Jimmy knows, and, of course, I cannot ask him.

He cried last night after dinner, but he doesn't know I saw him. I was very sorry Lily was so stupid and pig-headed about sending him to school. You were perfectly right, he ought to be at school, and now that she has a husband to look after, it's very selfish of her to insist on keeping the child at home. Your Uncle Dan thinks so, too. He was here to-day, and did his best to persuade Lily to send him to Giles Dickenson's, but in her gentle little way she's perfectly immovable on this point. I am glad to say Jacques behaved very well when your Uncle Dan spoke to him about it; he said that, although he loved Jim very much, he was Lily's boy, not his, and that she must decide; but between you and me I think the dear little idiot decided when poor Jim died that she would never separate herself from his son.

You will be amused to hear that Bruno and I had a long talk about things this afternoon. He had wheeled me down my inclined plane into the garden, and I was sitting in the rose-garden, the place you used to call "Ispahan"—do you remember? Jacques had taken Lily and the children to Ranelagh, so Bruno and I were undisturbed. He has a very logical mind, Bruno, and our memories go back so far through the years side by side that we see things pretty well eye to eye, although, to do him justice, the old man is, I believe, absolutely unbiassed by my ladyship.

I asked him what he thought of your going away, and told him that I felt very much grieved by it; and

he told me that he thought it was the best thing l'onorevole Signor Carlo could have done. Then he said once more, sniffing a rose I had given him, that he considered you could not have done better than go away, all things considered.

My dear Charles, I wonder what he meant with his "all things considered." He is very subtle, very Latin, and there is a fine, big heart beating for all of us under his butler's coat, and it was very evident that he meant something in particular, but I dared not ask him what it was.

Sometimes I have thought that I knew something about you that you have never chosen to tell me, but I have never asked you. I am not asking you now, my dear, so you needn't frown your funny, crooked, Medician frown! We are not very easy askers, we Hainault tribe, are we?

Your Uncle Dan says we must get a tutor at once for Jimmy, and to this Lily agrees; but she says she won't have one living in the house, for a particular reason that she wouldn't tell anybody. I, however, wicked old thing that I am, know the particular reason. Bruno told me. She's had your rooms swept and settled down for a long rest, and the two doors are locked, my dear, and no strange, casual young tutor is going to have your room. That's what she means. Dear little Lily! I love her silent, thoughtful little sentimentalities. This man is very devoted to her, and I hope she's happy; and yet, do you know, she always wears a little brooch Jim gave her while she was still at school—you know, with the little "L" and

"J" in diamonds. It is late at night, my dear, and the faithful, unpleasant Drake believes me to be asleep. I am sitting up in bed, looking like an old witch, writing, as no lady of seventy-eight ought to be writing; by the light of one candle, and the candle's behaving very badly. It seems to be spitting all down its own sides, and I must go to sleep. Some day, my dear Charles, I mean to write a book about dreams, the dreams of old people, for do you know, here am I, an old, old thing, and yet almost every night I am young again, and wandering about in beautiful parts of the earth that I knew when I was young; and the people who are with me are not old, as I am, but young and bold and bad, many of them, and dear, and delightful; and oh, my dear Charles, so many of them make love to me! Now, good-night, my dear. Write to me soon, and write long letters. No one but I shall see them, and when I have read them through I will burn them. God bless you.

Your very affectionate aunt,

MARY CATHERINE DAMPIERRE.

II

*From the Lady Mary Dampierre to the Honourable
Charles Thorn, Hôtel Ritz, Paris.*

July 19.

MY DEAR CHARLES,

Your description of French food upsets me, and gives me a lawless longing to fold my tent and fly to Paris, that gastronomical heaven; but I am glad to know that you are thus making a beast of yourself!

Overeating has helped many a man through a bad time! I have only just time to catch the post to-day, but I must write, for I have a real piece of news for you. Guess who is coming to be Jimmy's tutor—that young Martin, who was your Uncle Dan's secretary just before you went away to Greece last time. You remember him, don't you—an underdone-looking young man with olive-oil coloured hair. Your Uncle Dan came to see us about ten days ago, and he and I again did our very best to make Lily see sense about Jim; but the long and the short of it was that she would not send him to school. The minx got hold of Arthur Hesketh, and he certainly did say that home tuition would be better for the boy until he gets stronger. I never saw the doctor yet who couldn't be twisted round the finger of a pretty woman, and poor, dear old Arthur is no exception to this rule. The next thing was to find a tutor, and we were all racking our brains and boring our friends about it when suddenly this Mr. Martin turned up—he came to call on Jacques, as a matter of fact, and I think it was Lily who suggested that he might do for Jim. He had been a tutor for some years before he went to Dan as secretary, and had really extraordinary references; so though Aghassy was very decent about it and seemed to hesitate about putting his friend forward as a candidate, Lily thought it an excellent plan, so he came about a week ago, and we are all quite used to him and like him very much, although he is too lady-like to suit me, and has a very big upper lip, rather like a rabbit's, so that I shouldn't be surprised if at any minute he began

to nibble the leaves in the vases. Jimmy seems to like him, and they work regularly, so all is well—but oh, Charles dear, I do miss your ugly, familiar face, and I think Jimmy does, too, although I must admit that Jacques is the best stepfather I have ever seen up to this. Picotee adores him and calls him “Jakey,” and he doesn’t mind a bit; and he is giving her for her birthday a most delightful saddle-horse that must have cost a great deal of money. Even *he* can’t conceal the price of a horse!

You ask me how Lily seems. I can only say she’s just the same. I think she laughs a little oftener, which is good. Her laughter is musical and soft, as you know, and one can’t hear it too often. The old house has all its windows open this fine weather, and the sun comes in, and the wind blows through—our island’s richness in winds can’t be denied, however ungenerous its sun is!—and the garden is really a very fragrant, lovely place. We are a dull, peaceful happy household, and I hope we may remain so.

So you are going to Russia! Have you ever thought, my dear Charles, what a good thing it is with people like us that we have plenty of money without working for it? I suppose the Socialists would think we don’t deserve it, and probably we don’t; but we don’t do much harm, do we? and surely, the more a man or woman can see, without distressing or upsetting other people, of this beautiful, enchanting world, the better must be pleased the intelligent God who made us. Bruno has just given me a little booklet with little pictures in it, and I have been reading it. My dear

Charles, do you know I almost wish that I believed in some sectarian deity. It must be pleasant to be able to think people who go to another kind of church from one's own must be heading for hell-fire! But I can't. One church seems to me exactly as good as the others, and best of all I still feel the old days to have been—the days of Poseidon, and Thetis the silver-footed, and grey-eyed Athene—the days when Dawn, the rosy-fingered, coloured the world.

And here I am, rambling along, a garrulous, irreligious old female who ought to know better, and while I have talked nonsense to you the post has gone, and you won't get this letter—invaluable document—until Thursday. God bless you, my dear Charles. Don't marry a Russian princess, and do come back before I am dead.

Your affectionate aunt,
MARY CATHERINE DAMPIERRE.

III

*From the Lady Mary Dampierre to the Honourable
Charles Thorn, care of H. B. M. Minister,
Teheran, Persia.*

February 11.

MY DEAR CHARLES,

Your letter has just this minute arrived, and we have never had the two you refer to. Not one word have I had from you since you were at Moscow. I was at Moscow once, many years ago. Oh dear, oh dear, how many years! And we stayed at a hotel looking over the English Park, and the beds were so short that

your uncle Arthur had to sleep with his feet on an arm-chair at the side of his. You seem to be having a very good time, and not missing your afflicted family as you should. However, your two last letters may have been full of laments and home-sickness, so I shall not scold you. You ask how Martin is getting along; that looks as if you had never had a very long letter Jimmy sent you to the address you gave in Odessa. Well, Martin is very satisfactory; though, apart from his duties, he is remarkably dull. He adores Jacques, who is very kind to him, as indeed he is to everybody. I think Jacques must, years ago, have done Martin some very good turn, for the little man seems full of gratitude towards him. Jim had some very stiff exams about a month ago and came out famously. Martin says they were as difficult as any public school exams that a boy of seventeen would have to undergo, so as Jimmy is not yet sixteen, we are all very pleased.

His heart is better, and Arthur Hesketh says that if he goes on leading a quiet and reasonable life there is no reason why his weakness should not be quite outgrown by the time he is twenty. Of course, it is rather hard to keep a boy of his age quiet, particularly as he has a strong liking for going to the play. It's the only form of amusement that Jacques likes, so they naturally encourage each other, and indulge in it. I do not suppose going to the theatre can really hurt Jim; but he is very delicate, of course, and I notice that he always looks very tired the day after one of these *sprees*, as they call them. Picotee, as I told you, is at school at Paris—at that nice place where the Branting-

ham girls went. She loves it, and her French is very much improved.

No news, except that your Uncle Dan has got all right again after his alarming attack, and we are all going to Oving-Wellow for August and September as usual. He is going to give Jim a little motor-car for his birthday, as Arthur Hesketh says it will be good for him. Did you get the papers I sent you with the articles about Jacques? They were really wonderful. Everybody seems to think that there is no one alive now who can touch him, and his music is a great happiness to me. He is so kind and simple about playing for us, too. He is really very kind to us all, about everything, not only about playing, and so wonderfully unassuming and modest about things; but still, I don't trust him quite, and sometimes on my bad days, when my heart is wrong, I can almost see a great, thick cloud hanging lower and lower over the house.

What a dull old creature I am to dismalize to you like this; but, to tell you the truth, I am moulting mentally just now. My mind is positively mildewed. I am beginning to feel old, and don't like it. Bruno hates it, too, and we lament together, to Drake's disgust. Drake is as perfect a maid and as insufferable a woman as ever!

Poor little Polenta is dead—Bruno's dog, you know—and he has bought a most revolting pup, fifty-yelp-power, a horrid dog full of Babylonian vices, and his name is Risotto.

My dear Charles, I wish you were here; but there you are, in your rose-garden, living on boiled rice and

coagulated milk and smoking a water-pipe, I suppose. You have grown a beard, and dyed it with henna; perhaps you are riding on a big camel with feet like sponges. Bismilla! Mashallah! By the way, if you see any of that iridescent Kashan lustre ware, get me a bit of it, and some pear-wood sherbet-spoons. Forgive this dull letter and write soon to your very affectionate aunt,

MARY CATHERINE DAMPIERRE.

P. S.—Remember you have been away nearly a year. If you are not careful, I shall have grown up before you are back.

IV

(A YEAR LATER)

*To the Honourable Charles Thorn, Nikko, Japan,
from the Lady Mary Dampierre.*

April 15.

MY DEAR CHARLES,

Thanks for your loving and sympathetic cablegram. I am glad, we are all glad, that you did not hurry back, and we hope that by this time you are quite well again. You will have had Lily's letter, and I think Picotee's, so I won't repeat what they have told you. It was so sudden, and his being three years younger than me, he seemed likely to live longer than I; and here he is gone, the last of my generation, my only brother, my dear, dear old Dan! I can hardly believe it even now. Of course we buried him at Oving-Wellow, and it was odd to think as I sat in my chair at the edge of the vault that only one more coffin

would, according to my father's will, follow his into that darkness, and that that one coffin would be mine. Is it not odd to reflect, dear Charles, that whatever Life can do to one, every man and every woman can count on that last, unfailing possession—a coffin! The funeral was on the 17th of March, a blowy day with gusts of rain and big cracks of blue in a grey sky. It was a neuralgic, rheumatic day, and I could not help thinking that your Uncle Dan would have hated the draughts in the church if he had been able to feel them. Picotee, of course, was not there, but the rest of us were, and Jacques was extremely gentle and kind with Lily, who, as you know, was always very fond of her Uncle Dan, and whose quiet grief was very deep. Jim, who has grown very tall and looks extremely delicate, though Jacques assures me I am over-anxious about him, looked very like my mother as he stood there, all in black, during the service. I have got to the time of life when one easily sees in young people resemblances to the dead and gone of one's own generation.

Mr. Martin, whom Picotee and I secretly call "the Maggot," did not come, and Maud was in Italy, so there were only us four from Yellowleaf, and Arthur Hesketh—who has had all his front teeth out, which alters his profile for the worse—and one or two neighbours. The Duke was very kind, said he had always valued William—as he called him, and as I suppose I ought to, "Daniel Lambert" being hardly a nickname that one ought to apply to one's newly dead brother. Mr. Prescott read the will, which was not a surprise to anybody of the family except in one thing, and I

hope, my dear boy, that for the sake of a dead old man who loved you, and a comparatively alive old woman who does love you, you will make the sacrifice it asks you. By a codicil, made as recently as January, your Uncle Dan appoints you and Jacques joint guardians to Jimmy. You knew that you were to be guardian, of course, and I know that the appointment of Jacques will not please you; but my brother, who was a clever and wise old man, thought a great deal about this matter before he made up his mind, and he has not done it out of empty compliment to Lily, as you may be inclined to think.

Jacques and Lily have been married nearly two and a half years, and since their marriage, more particularly during the last eighteen months, your Uncle Dan has been here at Yellowleaf more than ever before. He and Lily had grown to be great friends, and like all old people who have few relations and friends left, he and I drew together very closely towards the last. The second stroke, you remember, took place here, and for two months he never left the house; so you see he had many opportunities of studying Jacques, and he did study him, and he came to the conclusion that all of us, and particularly I, had been unjust and foolish about him. He told me a fortnight before his death that he believed Jacques to be a perfectly good and sincere man, and that he had a great respect for him; and it is because of this trust and respect that he has paid him the compliment of appointing him one of Jimmy's guardians. Your poor Uncle has left everything he had in the world to Jimmy, and he wished him to take

his name. I believe it will be arranged later for the boy to have the title, as the King was always good enough to tell your uncle how much he regretted the possibility of the name's dying out, and once hinted that the matter of the title could be made possible, and Lily's being born a Dampierre of course simplifies it, too.

So there you are, my dear, and I hope you will come home to take up your duties, as undoubtedly you ought to do. Whatever your private feelings may be towards Jacques, I know him well enough now to be able to answer for one thing at least: he will make everything as easy as possible for you, and meet you more than half-way in any efforts at friendliness you may make towards him.

Dear Charles, I am eighty years old, and the wood that is to enclose my bones is probably already cut and drying in some undertaker's yard. Come back soon; I want to see you. We all want to see you. Bruno was saying only a few days ago that he wished l'onorevole Signor Carlo would come back. It seems he saw a crocus in the garden and, for some reason, it reminded him of you. God knows why.

Your affectionate old aunt,

MARY CATHERINE DAMPIERRE.

CHAPTER VI

I

CHARLES THORN came back by way of America as quickly as he could, reaching London in June.

He arrived about dinner-time, and came straight into the drawing-room to the old lady's Corner, where the whole family were awaiting him. Aghassy rose and greeted him cordially. For a moment they looked into each other's eyes, and when they looked away there was a little silence. Then Picotee burst out: "Oh, Charles, your hair!"

Thorn's hair, indeed, was of a uniform iron grey, which, combined with the sun-burn of nearly two years under a grilling eastern sun, had changed him very much. He looked well, but the gentle sadness, that was so like that of Giovanni de Medici, had lost its look of possible fleetingness and become permanent. His clothes, particularly his collar, had an old-fashioned air, and his hands had been burnt until they were nearly black.

For his part he found changes everywhere. Lady Mary looked smaller, and the top of her wheel-chair higher, and her great piece of tapestry was nearly finished. Picotee, whom he had left a bulging child, might now with truth be complimented by the pretty term "a young maid." She was, indeed, nearly fifteen, and seemed much more mature and sure of herself than Jim, who was only four months short of seventeen.

Charles Thorn leaned back in his chair, and turned his eyes towards Mrs. Aghassy. She was the least changed of the group, and in her soft mourning, with a string of pearls round her little delicate throat, she looked very slight, very young, and, to him, very lovely. Aghassy, who was already dressed for dinner, had put on weight, and, Thorn's quietly observant eyes noticed, was wearing a collar of a size larger than formerly. He looked very well, very prosperous. His queer, tilted eyes were as clear as those of a child. Life had evidently been good to him.

Thorn shivered and drew closer to the fire. "It's chilly," he said, and everybody laughed, for it appeared that that day had been the hottest known in England for some years.

II

After dinner Aghassy went to his study, and Jim and Picotee accompanied Thorn to his old rooms, and helped him open his trunks and find the many presents he had brought for everybody. He had not forgotten the pear-wood sherbet-spoons, and there was a string of turquoise beads from the mines of Nishapin, carved ivories for Jim, pieces of Shiraz enamel for everybody, and for Lady Mary the most beautiful of silver-grey kimonos, with cranes not embroidered, but woven into it. For Bruno he had some wonderful tobacco, and a pair of flamboyant, crimson leather, Persian slippers.

Picotee, who stood before the glass admiring herself with the beads round her neck, asked him had he brought anything for her mother.

“Indeed I have, for her and——” he hesitated, “Aghassy together.”

After a few minutes he produced from one of the largest boxes a small carpet, about five feet five by three feet eight, and with this over his big shoulder, he led the way downstairs and back to the drawing-room.

Lily was very grateful for the gift, which she called “very beautiful,” and “quite lovely”; and Lady Mary knew enough to realize that it was a prayer rug of the best period—that is, the sixteenth century. But when, after an hour’s tactful absence, Aghassy joined the little party in the drawing-room, and his wife explained to him that the strip of beautiful coloured wool over the chair was a gift for him as well as for her, his demeanour was so odd that he startled everybody. His long green eyes opened suddenly as he looked at the rug, and a deep flush crept up over his face, and, taking the thing in his hands as if it were a shawl in a way that struck Lady Mary as being foreign and queer, he turned it over and bent his head down to it, looking, as Jim afterwards said, “as if he were going to taste or smell it.” Then, straightening himself up, and crumpling the marvellously soft fabric with one of his big hands, said, looking at Charles Thorn; “This must be nearly three hundred and eighty knots to a square inch.”

Thorn shrugged his shoulders.

“Shah Abbas?”

Again Thorn shrugged his shoulders.

Aghassy persisted: “It’s a Seistan rug.”

But Thorn seemed to know very little about the

thing. "I like the colours," he said modestly, "and that pine-apple thing——"

Lady Mary hadn't the slightest idea what they were talking about, but she knew, as her eyes rested on her nephew's face, that for some reason he was doing what to him was a very unusual thing; he was lying. There was a pause, and then, with a few words of conventional thanks for his share in the gift, Aghassy rose and, with an affectionate smile at Lady Mary, strolled round the Corner, and after a few moments opened the piano.

Thorn, as he listened to the flood of music that, wild at first, gradually settled down into the gentlest beauty, wondered that he had never before noticed Jim's resemblance to his mother.

Lily sat in the big chair covered with Japanese-plum coloured satin, and Jim was sitting on the floor near her smoking a cigarette. Lily was pretty, her smooth features almost too regular, her soft brown hair silky and gleaming with care. Jim's nose was too big, his eyes too small, and his hair stood up in a ridiculous tuft like a cockatoo's; but they were very alike, and it struck the home-comer with a sharp pang, that he instantly stigmatized as jealousy, that the boy's expression, as he listened to the music, was almost as adoring as was his mother's. In the old days Jim had been altogether Thorn's, and now Thorn, poor lonely devil, asked himself whether by losing heart and abandoning the field to the man he hated he had lost the boy's love.

The music went on and on, Lily and Jim were float-

ing in bliss on its waves; Lady Mary's long, pathetic eyelashes—eyelashes that had been celebrated all her life, and of which she was very proud—drooped on her cheeks; Picotee was reading quietly. Thorn felt utterly alone and miserable. He had come home in obedience to his old uncle's wishes and because his aunt missed him, but he felt a very Rip Van Winkle as he sat there and watched the three people he loved, the *only* three people in the world whom he loved, listening spell-bound to the music of the man with whom he had made friends, with whom he was henceforth to be closely associated in their common guardianship of the boy, and whom he hated.

III

The next morning Charles Thorn and Aghassy had a talk together which, from its ceremony and formalism, might almost have been called a council. It took place in the austere music-room, where all the windows were open, and Thorn never remembered it without thinking of the smell of lilacs; also he never smelt lilacs without remembering the council.

Aghassy, who seemed instinctively and without any assumption of authority to take the lead, shook hands with him gravely and bade him sit down in the one chair the room contained. He himself sat on the piano-stool, and, folding his arms over his great chest, began at once by saying pleasantly: "I am afraid, Mr. Thorn, that this will—or, rather, this codicil—of Lord Hainault's has been something of a shock to you."

Charles nodded as gravely. "It has," he said, "but I am prepared to obey it."

"Good! Then I take it that on this matter of my wife's son, we meet on neutral ground."

Thorn's face, which hitherto had worn an almost sour expression, brightened suddenly, as his thin lips stretched in what Lady Mary always called his Medician grimace.

"We do," he said, "and it will make things easier for both of us that we talk plainly. The first thing I wanted to ask you was what you think of Jim's health. He looks to me very weedy, and it is plain that he is highly nervous."

Aghassy sketched a movement with his expressive hands, and shrugged his shoulders. "Nervous! Yes. It is a pity, but it is the malady of the period. Nearly everyone is nervous nowadays, and my dear wife, although so gentle and quiet, is, as you no doubt know, a very highly strung woman."

"Exactly! My aunt tells me that Doctor Hesketh has backed Lily in her decision to keep the boy at home——"

Aghassy interrupted: "A decision you doubtless deplore?"

Charles watched him as he lighted a cigarette, which he had rolled himself, before he answered:

"You are mistaken, Aghassy." And the dropping of the formal "Mr." was an effort and a concession fully appreciated by the other man. "I don't regret the boy's being kept at home. He is very delicate and always has been, and I am by no means a whole-

hearted champion of our public-school system. He is a very intelligent boy, naturally a student, and as it is plain that he means to be an artist—a painter—I have nothing whatever to say against his being educated at home. But tell me about this fellow Martin. I have not seen him for several years. I knew him very slightly when he was my uncle's secretary, but he didn't strike me then as being a particularly forceful person, and Jim needs guidance."

Aghassy looked up smiling; his lower lip projected a trifle more than formerly, and his dimples had lengthened and narrowed; the day was coming when they would be wrinkles.

"You forget," he said softly, watching the blue smoke of his cigarette mounting in the still, sunny air, "*me*. I am very fond of my wife's son, and like to think that my influence over him is a strong one."

Thorn nodded, with an odd feeling of defeat, and there was a pause. Then Aghassy again spoke, and the conference went on, lasting in all about an hour.

Outside in the sun Jim and Picotee were playing tennis, sprawling and lunging about the court in the beautiful, graceful awkwardness of their years. The sound of their laughter came in at the open window, punctuating the grave deliberations of their elders. Charles felt suddenly very old-fashioned, very old, very beaten. When the clock struck half-past eleven the door opened, and Bruno came in, the tidiest, cleanest of old men in his grey trousers and black coat, his immaculate hands, brown and withered, bearing a small tray with a glittering glass carafe of wine, a plate

of biscuits, and two glasses. When he had gone, Aghassy rose, and, going to the window, passed into the gallery, which in these hot summer days was delightfully shaded with a green canvas awning; he called Jim. The boy fired a last ball at his sister, and then came up the steps. Picotee did not follow him, but sat down cross-legged on the grass, and pretended to play the guitar on her racket.

It struck Charles Thorn, for the second or third time since his return, that it was extraordinary how instantly and unfailingly Aghassy was obeyed by everybody in the house. No one ever hesitated or argued when he had given an order or even expressed a wish, and now Jimmy came slouching into the room, wiping his forehead on his handkerchief, his face flushed, his eyes full of light, his too red lips parted merrily over his teeth.

"Hullo, Charles," he said. "Are you going to have a drink with us?"

Aghassy laughed. "How dissipated you make Doctor Hesketh's morning glass of port sound, my dear boy! Sit down in the corner out of the draught, you rascal."

Jim sat down, and Aghassy poured out three glasses of wine, two of which he handed to the others with a little air of ceremony that was rather pleasant. Then they all three nibbled biscuits and drank their wine. It made a pleasant picture, and Aghassy's queer feline face was full of kindness and unassuming hospitality.

Charles Thorn never forgot that little episode.

CHAPTER VII

I

THAT evening Lily Aghassy sat upstairs in the little morning-room, that always had been hers, sewing. It was raining, but, like many people who take no exercise and rarely go out of the house, she was very fond of fresh air, and both windows were wide open. On the bricks of the little courtyard between the fireplace side of Lady Mary's Corner and the side of the conservatory, rain-drops were thudding down so fast that each one made a tiny fountain by its impact. In the middle of this courtyard grew a white birch, and so silvery were its dark leaves that it seemed as if it and the rain were sisters. The study was a small room, shabby in so far that nothing in it, not even the chintzes, was ever renewed until it was absolutely necessary, for Lily was one of those women who love their possessions, their little belongings, all of which are, to such people, intensely, inextricably associated with events and people. Here on the wall still hung thirty-year-old photographs of her father and mother, and the few books in the little white wood shelves had hardly been added to since her girlhood. She was no reader. It was a faintly rosy little room, full of little old gifts and souvenirs, and its mental atmosphere was like its owner's—still and reserved, and less indefinite than it seemed at first. People remembered it as they did Lily, with a clarity of vision that surprised

themselves. She was sitting now by the open window in an old American rocking-chair, and as she sewed she rocked gently and rhythmically; it seemed as if the chair rocked her rather than that she rocked it, so passive and at ease did her little figure look; but her face wore a look of gravity, almost anxiety, as she stitched away on some long white frill. This was an expression that for all her simplicity of mind she never allowed her face to wear when she was with her sharp-sighted old mother-in-law, and when, presently, a knock came at her door and she called out, "Come in," by some innocent, unconscious artifice she was smiling as she looked up.

It was Charles Thorn, and he told her as he entered that Aghassy had told him he would find her there. He sat down near her, and, clasping his hands behind his grey head, let his eyes rest on her with a luxurious completeness that he rarely allowed them; for he was a man whose eyes never obtruded on any face, and who was indeed distinguished in his relations with women by a kind of shy dignity, or dignified shyness, that was old-fashioned and rather attractive.

"I have been talking to Martin," he began at last. "He has had tea with Aunt Mary and me, and then we went and sat in the garden until the rain began."

"Yes, Charles."

"He seems a good chap," Thorn said slowly. "I think I rather like him."

She looked up, arching her eyebrows a little. "Didn't you expect to like him?" she asked. "Hadn't Mamma told you that we all do—Jacques, I mean?"

"Ah, yes, I know; but you must remember that Aghassy and I are joint guardians for another four years; I was bound to judge the man, no matter who liked him."

She looked down at her work, and, clasping her hands in a childish way that she had never lost, asked him with much gravity if he had seen Jimmy's drawings, and did he not think them beautiful.

"I think they show great promise, though what I think doesn't matter much. I suppose before long you will be sending him to Paris or somewhere for proper teaching?"

She gave a little cry of alarm; "Oh no, oh no, Charles! Not to France! He can study here in England——"

Thorn burst out laughing, although perhaps there was not much of a burst about his soft, rather dry laughter, as he accused her of insularity, which, after all, is only another word for ignorance. He felt the irritation that travelled English people, who speak real French, invariably feel when brought up against the absurd prejudices of their untravelled, one-tongued countrymen.

"The French people as a nation," he declared, "are saner, more honest-minded, and a damned sight more moral than we are, Lily. However, that doesn't matter. Why I came up to see you now is, that I had a long talk with Aghassy this morning about Jimmy; and that he advised me to ask you what *you* think of one or two points."

"Did Jacques—tell you to ask me?—really?"

He looked at her closely. "He did. Does that surprise you?"

She was agitated for some reason, and dropped her little gold thimble, which rolled across the polished floor and landed in the very middle of the prayer rug he had brought back. He followed it and picked it up, and stood for a moment looking at the tiny thing that stood on the end of his finger like a fly on a mushroom. It was a gold thimble with a row of diamonds and rubies just above its waist, and on the clear space under the jewels were engraved the words:

"Sit on a cushion and sew a fine seam,
And you shall have strawberries, sugar and cream."

And then there was a date—a date nearly eighteen years back—and it was the date of her marriage to his cousin James Dampierre, and it had been his wedding gift to her.

II

Before he went downstairs they stood together in the window looking down at the rain-distressed, quivering little birch tree.

"Do you remember the day we planted that?" Thorn asked. She leaned out so far that a few drops of rain fell on her silky head, and he could not see her face, but she nodded, and he heard her answer: "Yes—and Jim bringing it back from Devonshire wrapped up in a blue check apron belonging to a farmer's wife——"

There was a long pause between them, broken only by the patting of the rain. And then suddenly she turned and faced him.

"Charles," she said, looking up into his face obviously with an effort, "you do like Jacques, don't you?"

Luckily for him she went on quickly before he had time to answer. "I have missed you so—we all have. It wasn't right—it wasn't natural, your not being here—oh, you will try to like him, won't you?"

The blue eyes filled with tears, and her lower lip quivered in a childish way that she had never outgrown.

He frowned a little and then said slowly: "Why should not I like him?" He dared speak as cold as he felt, because he knew that although she was sensitive in some ways, she was not observant in others. Her face expressed a puzzled distress for a moment. "I thought—I feared you didn't like him," she murmured, clasping and unclasping her hands on her breast; "there are so few of us left, and Jim was so fond of you——"

He nearly asked her bitterly whether she thought her late husband would have expected him to be particularly attached to her present one, but he said nothing, although his face showed in its quivering whiteness an intense, almost fierce exasperation. And when he did speak, it was to say in the grave, kind voice to which she had been used nearly all her life: "I will do my best, Lily, and I am sure Aghassy will, although it is naturally an uncomfortable situation for us both. Thus far I only know that if you wanted Jimmy to go to school, Aghassy would agree to it."

"Yes, yes," she broke in eagerly. "It was me who

would not let him go to school, that was entirely *my* doing! I know it's silly, Charles, but I couldn't, I just couldn't let Jimmy go away. You see, he's all there's left of Jim, and I must have him."

She broke off suddenly with a furious blush, as she realized how very uncomplimentary her outburst had been to Aghassy.

Thorn comforted her by seeming to notice nothing, and a few minutes later walked down the long passage and round the curve to his own room. He sat down and, leaning his head on his hand, gave himself up to troubled thought. There was something wrong in the house; he felt it, but could not make up his mind what it was.

III

At dinner that night a strong suspicion came to him, for Jim, who had been painting hard all day, came in limp and pale and morose, drank far too much claret, and became aggressive and short-tempered; and when he, Charles Thorn, suggested laughingly that the boy's glass had been filled often enough, Jimmy answered him with strong irritation and impatience, practically telling his old tutor to mind his own business. But that would have meant little, for nervous ill-temper was to some extent born in all the Dampierres, and they respected it in each other; but it surprised Thorn to see that Aghassy took his stepson's side, by no means encouraging him in his rudeness to Thorn, but kindly and lazily assuring Thorn that Arthur Hesketh had advised this particularly good claret for the boy, and

that it did not do to be too hard on youths of Jimmy's age. Jim flashed a grateful glance at his stepfather, and, when dinner was over, Charles Thorn went for a walk in the rain, facing the unpleasant knowledge that his difficulties were increased by the amazing fact that Aghassy, in his fondness for the boy, was spoiling him absurdly. It was a new, clear light thrown on the man's character, and Thorn was much puzzled by it and, when he mentioned it before he went to bed to Lady Mary, the old lady agreed with him.

"You're right," she said. "He does. He spoils them both. Whoever would have thought that he would have been so fond of them?"

Thorn lay awake long that night, trying to reduce his inchoate thoughts to order; trying to make up his mind what would be the best way of carrying out his duties as guardian. He was unhappy and disturbed, and finally went off to sleep saying to himself over and over again: "My day is finished before night has come; my day is finished before night has come."

IV

The next few days Charles Thorn devoted to his investigations into the character and educational methods of Sylvester Martin. The old schoolroom at the top of the masked staircase was still in use, and it was certainly in Mr. Martin's favour that he and his pupil were herein shut up in scholastic isolation every day from half-past nine to half-past twelve. At half-past twelve they either rode together or went for a walk, returning just before lunch at half-past one.

Thorn felt a little shy about his investigations, but went through them conscientiously, encouraged in so doing by Aghassy, who, in fact, handed the whole matter over to him. "For the present, I am up to my eyes in work," Aghassy explained, "and I shall be very grateful to you for having an eye on Martin, and saying exactly what you think of his methods."

Charles had an eye on Martin, and found his methods to be full of good intentions and capabilities that, no doubt, would have proved very fruitful to young Jim had they been left uninterrupted and undisturbed. This, however, they were not, for, although he was undoubtedly very busy, Aghassy apparently could not resist the temptation of the little staircase opposite his room, and, over and over again, Charles found that he was breaking into the lesson, rather out of what seemed to be sheer inability to keep away from Jimmy. On two occasions he even found Martin alone, his pupil having been rapt from his care and taken, once to Devonshire for a day or two at the sea, and once to Ostend, where Aghassy was giving a concert. These interruptions, ominous to Thorn, he found to be accepted quite as a matter of courtesy by Martin. The second time it happened Martin, established very comfortably in an armchair by the open window near which the "battle of the staircase" had taken place two years and a half ago, explained the situation with some skill.

"He is devoted to Jim, you know," the "Maggot" declared, puffing at his cigarette, which was not above suspicion of being scented, "and often takes him away for a little change. Mrs. Aghassy used to object, but

I think she sees that it's good for the kid; he's an awfully delicate kid, you know, and Aghassy's idea is that he ought to be hardened a bit. Fatherless boys are almost always rather soft, you know."

Thorn's face hardened; he acquitted the cold-cream-coloured young man of any wish to accuse him of such softening, or even to prick him by a passing word, but he knew very well that, under his care, Jim had undergone no softening process, nor coddling, nor spoiling. The "Maggot," he saw, was not at all bad as maggots go, but it was plain to be seen that he lived, moved, and had his being under the powerful shadow of his pupil's stepfather.

Charles Thorn drawled as he answered, his long legs stretched tensely out across the floor, his eyes fixed on the toes of his beautifully polished chestnut-brown boots. "Aghassy seems very much inclined to spoil Jim," he said in a non-committal voice.

The "Maggot" looked up, his pale grey eyes shining with sincerity between their raw-looking pink edges. "He simply adores him," he answered. "And Jim does him. Isn't it a pity," he added, after a pause, "that they haven't children of their own?"

Thorn gathered his long, lank limbs together and rose. He didn't speak for a minute. Then he said shortly: "And what about mathematics? He used to be rotten at them—Jim, I mean."

The two men talked for some time about the tastes and powers of young Dampierre, and parted on the friendliest terms. Charles Thorn went back to his own room convinced that, whatever his faults might be, or

his lacks, Sylvester Martin was a perfectly conscientious and well-meaning young man.

v

Thorn had been back at Yellowleaf for about four weeks before he could even begin to arrive at any definite conclusion about the future. He was perfectly ready to devote his life to young Jim, but things were in such a state that he felt like a well-meaning fifth wheel. The cart ran so smoothly and rigidly without him that he felt unnecessary and cumbrous in the household. Two years is a very long time in the life of a child, and he told himself bitterly that, by throwing up the sponge and running away as he had done, he deserved being supplanted, as he undoubtedly had been. His long, sad face grew more weary-looking, more bitter, as the gay summer days passed by, and he found himself unhappy, in the inchoate misery of things to an almost unbearable degree.

Then Lady Mary rose—metaphorically—and snote him hip and thigh, and told him that he was a weakling, and unworthy of the trust shown him by Lord Hainault. “Can’t you see,” the old lady exclaimed, “that this slug, this maggot, is no good for a boy like Jim?”

Thorn weighed his words well before he answered. “He is a very well-educated man, and seems to know his job, and I rather like him.”

Lady Mary stabbed at her tapestry with the needle of exasperation, and in her lucent old eyes was a light of battle.

"Listen to me, Charles Thorn," she said. "Either you have become a perfect idiot through maundering about in the Tropics—" ("Persia and Japan are not in the Tropics," he interposed mildly)—"or you don't care a tent-pegger's curse any more for any of us. Can't you see that Jim has changed very much of late, and not for the better? Why, even Jacques sees that, and he's idiotically fond of him."

"What's the matter with Jim?" Thorn asked quietly.

Lady Mary tapped angrily on the arm of her chair with her thimble-crowned middle finger. "Don't be a fool, Charles," she said shortly. "The boy hasn't murdered anybody, of course, nor robbed a bank, nor seduced a virgin——"

Charles Thorn smiled, new creases showing above his eyes and mouth. "Elizabethan old lady!" he murmured.

Lady Mary laughed, too. "Sorry if I shock you, but you know what I mean. I cannot explain—I am most dreadfully grieved about it; no boy in this world ever had better care and more conscientious looking after, and yet—well, I don't know; he's changed, changed very much, and if you cannot see it, Charles Thorn, you ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"I haven't said I can't see it, Aunt Mary," he remarked quietly. "I have been home now for over two months, and I have never been so puzzled in my life. There is a change in Jim, and it's more than the change naturally contingent on his age. I can't get near him personally; but that's my own fault for having gone

away, and I deserve it, and I'm not grumbling. As far as I can see, Martin is doing his best, and is really interested in the boy; and as to poor Aghassy, his devotion to him is almost touching."

"'Poor Aghassy'!" broke in Lady Mary softly. "The world is coming to an end when you pity Jacques."

The window was open, and in the little courtyard Bruno, in a grey alpaca coat and an all-over green baize apron, was doing a little gardening. He had planted round the roots of the white birch a cluster of enormous Italian petunias of all colours, and these were the joy of his life; their dark beauty, frail and fairy-like, responsive to every breath of air, had evoked a passion of tenderness in his breast.

From where he sat Charles Thorn could see Bruno as he pottered about, picking gingerly at the soil, and there was something chivalric in his attitude.

"What are you looking at?" the old lady asked, for the window was at the far side of the fireplace.

"Bruno. He is making love to those petunias of yours."

They went on with their talk, and finally Thorn cleared his mind with an odd declaration. "It isn't so much what I *think* about Jim and everything, as what I feel," he said very slowly, leaning his big, bony chin on his hands. "And what I feel is so simple that I cannot explain it in words. That sounds mad, but it isn't; I feel miserable, and something like fear, and yet I can see no earthly reason for such fear."

Lady Mary nodded. "You are imaginative, my

dear boy," she said, "and that Italian grandmother of yours is responsible for a lot of perfectly unnecessary suffering on your part; but in this case my nerves jump with yours, my soul is frightened, too. Martin is all right, as you say, but—" she stuck her needle into her canvas and clasped her small old hands over her work—"he must go."

Bruno was singing softly to himself in a pure tenuous, tenor voice, and for a moment the two people in the drawing-room listened.

Then Thorn said: "Why?"

"He is not strong enough, that is why. Jim needs not so much someone to teach him history and mathematics and Greek—though Greek, I believe, is the best of all——" The old lady pointed to the little bookcase at her side where stood, simply and richly bound, as befits their dignity, Gilbert Murray's masterly translations of the Greek tragedies. It was one of the incongruities of his old aunt's character that always delighted Thorn, her almost sacred love of these immutable, marvellous works.

His grim face softened a little as his eyes followed hers to the row of dark green books, but he did not speak, and she went on: "More than technical instruction Jim needs stiffening by some strong, stark nature."

"Stark! No, poor little Martin can never be called stark."

"Charles!" Lady Mary leaned forward over her bastion of embroidery, and spoke with deep earnestness. "It is no good, this fellow won't do; and the man who must bring up Jim must be able to withstand

Jacques, and fight against his ridiculous softness for the boy, to combat his spoiling, for which one cannot help loving the man even though one disapproves of it—and the only man in the world who can do this is you.”

Charles Thorn, who had never settled down as a permanent inmate of Yellowleaf, and who, for the last fortnight, had been living in delightful rooms in Bruton Street, flinched at this onslaught.

“That is the one thing I can’t do,” he said. “My days of tutoring Jim are over.”

As he spoke, the hall-door opened and Jim and Aghassy came in. The boy had slipped his arm through his stepfather’s, and they were both shouting with laughter in a way delightful to behold.

“Here’s this villain,” Aghassy burst out, “insisting on a spree to-night. He wants to go to the Palace to see an American girl who thinks she sings, but who really in a *disease*——”

On their heels, deprecating and pink-eyed, came Sylvester Martin, full of woe and reminders of belated work. Jim had been slack, very slack, he said, of late. The arrears to be made up were terrifying. He really thought—

As he spoke there came in through the window the sound of Bruno’s beautiful old voice :

Quant’ è belle giovinezza
Che si fugge tuttavia ;
Chi vuol’ esser lieto, sia ;
Di doman’ non c’ è certezza.”

Aghassy's queer face softened and changed as he listened, and then, with one of his very rare chuckles of amusement, he called the old man to the window.

Bruno's white head framed in the square of sunshine made a pleasant and arresting picture, and in order to see it Lady Mary wheeled her chair a few inches forward.

"It's a beautiful song, Bruno," Aghassy said gently.

Bruno smiled, his wonderful teeth glinting. "Si Signore," he answered gaily, "that was written in the fifteenth century in my beautiful Florence by Lorenzo the Magnificent."

Jimmy, his thin, sharp-chinned face full of interest, asked the old man what the words meant, and Bruno, with the magnificent disregard of the social scale, which, combined with perfect courtesy, is characteristic of his nation, translated his song.

"How beautiful is youth and how fleeting!
Who wishes to be happy, let him be.
There is nothing certain about to-morrow."

CHAPTER VIII

I

THORN was a man whose mind moved slowly; he was a deliberate thinker by nature, and his life had not been such as to hasten his decisions. For over a week he and Lady Mary struggled over the question of Martin and Jimmy, and several things happened during that week to buttress up the old lady's convictions and decisions, and to beat down the still unwilling Thorn in his determination not to live at Yellowleaf.

It had been a difficult matter for him to leave the old house where most of his quiet life had been spent, and he could not have done it, probably, had he not been impelled by his great anger with Aghassy; and even then he had been forced to fly to the ends of the earth. He loved every inch of the place and it had been a terrible wrench to him to settle himself elsewhere; but his rooms in Bruton Street were delightful: ample, low-ceilinged, Queen Anne rooms, with pleasant brown panellings and a delicately spindled staircase that had already become dear to him. His books he had carried surreptitiously away from Yellowleaf in his pockets, and in a couple of old much-travelled leather portmanteaus, and they were now comfortably installed in his old-new quarters. He was not a man to look for much happiness, but peace seemed to hover over him in Bruton Street, and the quiet scholarly spirit of his rooms, which before him had been inhabited for over

half a century by a learned old professor who had spent his whole life in writing a treatise on Seaweeds, was like a balm to his harassed, uneasy mind; and now Lady Mary not only wished him to give all that up, but insisted that he must do so, and made him miserable.

"I should think you could see," he cried out once, in supreme exasperation, "that I cannot come and live in the house of a man I hate."

But the old lady laughed in his face. "My poor Charles," she said, "you really are an idiot. In the first place you have not the slightest reason for hating Jacques; and in the second place the house is not his, nor his wife's. Yellowleaf is mine, my dear, and when I die, which I have no intention of doing for another half-century, it will be Jimmy's. And you need not glower at me, and you need not make ridiculous excuses. Your dislike to poor Jacques, as you yourself called him the other day, is simply prejudice, and a thoroughly British inability to change your mind. You did not like him when Lily married him, and you think it would be a weakness to like him now."

Charles Thorn glared at her. "Do you like him?" he asked thunderously.

And then Lady Mary did that most disarming thing—admitted, in the moment of triumph, her own secret feeling. "I don't know," she said. "And there you have the truth. Sometimes I do like him, and sometimes I don't; but I am fair-minded enough to admit that if I *don't* I have no reason for it." And so forth, and so forth, and so forth—the eternal subject went on, discussed between these two evenly matched

adversaries, early in the morning, in the unsympathetic hours of the early afternoon, and at night, when most people's judgments are mellowed and kindlier. And still they arrived at no conclusion. Meantime Jim walked over the prostrate form—metaphorically speaking—of the luckless "maggot," and did exactly as he liked. Somehow or other Thorn's being there seemed to have upset the academic tenor of the ways of the youth and his tutor, and the red rag of rebellion was planted, so to speak, over the schoolroom. The lessons were oftener interrupted; the wretched Martin wore a harassed look, and admitted, when hard pressed by the ruthless, golden-tongued Lady Mary, that Jim had got beyond him. "I can't understand him," the young Sylvester wailed, clasping his hands, the ends of which were gnawed and spongy-looking, with almost invisible nails. "I'm afraid he's got beyond me."

On this unwary admission of weakness Lady Mary pounced.

"Yes, no doubt," she said, her voice full of honied sympathy. "All the Dampierres go through a terribly fierce, unmanageable period between the ages of sixteen and twenty. Poor Mr. Martin! I'm afraid you will find Jim much worse in a year's time," she added pleasantly.

Mr. Martin attacked one of his finger-nails and tore at it voraciously. He was only nine-and-twenty himself, and when the duplicitous Lady Mary inquired, in a matchless voice of nun-like sympathy, what his *other* pupils had been like, he melted suddenly in a shapeless, unconfined way, like butter before a fire, and

confessed that Paul Bottomleigh had been a gentle youth, tamed by adenoids and a love for colouring photographs; and that his other pupil, the son of Sir Roderick Whale, had been one of those anxious and wolfish scholars whose progress nothing on earth could stop.

"He mopped it up—learning," he said, "did that boy, he was a sponge, and he sopped up knowledge through the very covers of the books."

When it is said that this remark was Mr. Martin's sole contribution to the joy of nations during over two years' residence at Yellowleaf, it is hardly necessary to say any more about him. He had confessed his weakness, and Lady Mary promptly bestowed the knowledge of it on Aghassy. Then she added, "So, my dear Jacques, the sooner Charles Thorn is installed in his own rooms and takes the boy in hand, the better."

Aghassy sat forward in the little cane chair, his head thrust towards the old lady in a way that made her say afterwards that "he looked as if he were going to toss her." He was strongly displeased, but, as was his wont, his words were mild, his protest gentle, and, as she could not but admit, very logical.

Thorn had been away a long time, he said, and he was, after all, only an amateur at the game of teaching, though, no doubt, a very clever amateur. Jim had passed his test exams remarkably well, and Martin, though he was doubtless a not particularly forceful personality, not one whom he, Aghassy, would like to leave the boy to entirely, yet he had certainly done his work well. He was a gentleman; he was tactful, un-

oppressive in the household, and—what Aghassy confessed was to him a point of great importance—he was willing to be guided by the wishes and tastes of the boy's natural guardians.

This talk between the old lady and Aghassy took place in the morning, in the garden. It was a lovely green and white English day, and as they talked they could see young Jim and the bone of contention sitting at a small rustic table on comfortable cane chairs, working with apparent interest over notebooks and big open volumes,

“Now if I, for instance,” Aghassy resumed after a pause, “found that Jim looked tired and needed a rest or change, I should only have to say to Martin, ‘Shut your books and leave the boy with me for a while,’ and he would do so without protesting, or even without what is even more exasperating—a deaf protest.”

“Mute, you mean,” Lady Mary said gently.

He looked up sharply, as he always did when anyone caught him out in a foreign expression. “I was thinking in French,” he said carelessly, and she nodded, accepting his elucidation but, at the same time, unregenerately pleased at her own pin-prick.

Lily joined them just then and no more was said, for Aghassy always showed a marked aversion from any kind of discussion before his wife. Lady Mary often wondered whether, when he and his wife were alone together, her absolute passivity was ever broken.

But though the old lady could say no more just then, it never occurred to her to give up her plan. She had made up her mind that it would be best for Jim to

have Charles Thorn back in the house, and there was never in her own mind a moment's doubt as to her wisdom in the matter. There were various ways in which she might accomplish her object, but she was rather at a loss with Aghassy, for his oddities were such that he seemed peculiarly unbribable. However, after much thought over a week-end, during which Thorn was at Oving-Wellow looking into some administrative matters, the old lady, after a few words with Bruno, made a sudden attack on Aghassy, and startled him by it to within an inch of his life.

It was in her bedroom whither she had sent for him to come—the threshold of which he had passed only once before in his life. It was late at night, and a violent summer storm was beating at the windows and moaning and growling round the old house in a way suggestive of prowling wild beasts, and broomstick-riding witches. Lady Mary sat up in her bed, which was a masterpiece of medieval Italy, carved and gilded in a lavish fashion, and over which wicked little Cupids clambered, bearing expensive-looking garlands.

She wore a tomato-coloured velvet jacket trimmed with broad white fur, like a lady in an old Dutch picture, and her beautiful white hair was covered by no cap, but hung in flat, glossy braids over her shoulders.

Aghassy stood at the foot of the bed, his arms folded, looking down at her with a rather lowering though perfectly courteous air.

"You are wondering why I sent for you," she began briskly.

Very un-English was his little bow and his answer,

"I am always at your feet." His voice changed as he spoke, as if he remembered too late that this phrase was Latin, not Anglo-Saxon; but for once she seemed not to notice the slip.

"Jacques," she said clearly, "I wonder if you know what a very rich woman I am?"

He said mildly, "Yes, I suppose you must be."

"Since my brother died, my income has more than trebled. You heard his will read, and you know that all this money of his which he left me—an arrangement made many years before any of us knew you—is to go on my death to Jim. If I die before Jim is of age my nephew, Charles Thorn, is to be sole trustee for this fortune. If I live till after Jim is twenty-one, Hainault's money, together with most of mine, goes unconditionally to Jim."

Aghassy nodded politely, but only with the interest of a man listening to something he already knows.

"Part of my money I am leaving to Lily, but, as she is already well provided for by my son, her first husband, as well as by you, whose devotion to her, my dear Jacques, makes me very happy, I am leaving Picotee three thousand a year with her mother as guardian until she is of age."

There was a pause, and then Aghassy said quietly: "It is very kind of you, dear Lady Mary, to tell me these things; but will you forgive me for reminding you that it is after twelve, and that I have a great deal of work to get through to-morrow?"

The old lady made an apologetic gesture with her hands, on which her rings still sparkled, although she was in bed.

"I beg your pardon," she said. "I am a garrulous, tiresome old woman, but I have a reason for saying what I have said, and here is what I sent for you about. I am not satisfied with your very nice Mr. Martin as tutor for my grandson. I like Mr. Martin, and I trust him; but he is incapable of coping with the difficult and intricate Dampierre temper and mind. Charles Thorn has come back from the ends of the earth on purpose to take up his duties as guardian—joint guardian—with you. He is very averse from giving up his independence and coming here to devote himself to the dull work of tutoring, but I know him well, and I know that out of his strong sense of duty he will do it, if you agree——. Wait a minute," she added, as Aghassy was about to speak; "I know that you don't particularly like Charles, and that the 'mag——' I mean Mr. Martin—is a friend of yours, but after all, you know that Charles is a very finely educated, very cultivated man of the highest character and the strongest family feeling, so you should put aside in this matter of your wife's son your personal prejudices."

She paused, and this time Aghassy didn't attempt to interrupt her. He stood leaning on the foot of the bed, his brows bent, his queer eyes half-closed, as he listened. A violent gust of wind rattled on the windows, and, at the open one, blew a long, filmy lace curtain straight out into the room. For a moment Lady Mary watched them from between her wonderful long lashes, until they had fluttered back to their place. Then she said: "You and I are friends now, Jacques, so I dare try and bribe you. If you will agree without any

further argument to have Charles Thorn come back and live here and educate Jim, I will add from this day two thousand a year to your income."

With that sense of the dramatic native to clocks of all kinds, a little silver time-piece over the fireplace chimed the three-quarters as she finished speaking. The storm outside was noisy; the storm inside was passing in absolute silence; but the air within was charged with electricity, and the strong, fearless old woman dared not move her hands on her brocaded bedspread lest they might tremble. When at last Aghassy spoke, his voice was husky and his manner perfectly deferential.

"No," he said quietly. "I do not care very much for money, and I have plenty of my own; but, even if I had not, I should not consent to have Mr. Charles Thorn living in—my wife's house."

Then he rose to his full height and unfolded his arms.

"I am sorry," he added gently, "to disappoint you, and I am sorry you don't like my poor Sylvester better; I will try to do all I can to strengthen him, and I must make more time for myself to devote to Jimmy. You were right in thinking that he needs a strong hand, and I, Lady Mary, am not a weak man."

The old lady was bitterly disappointed, and she was also ashamed, for she had made sure that the man would fall to her enormous bribe, and it added to her displeasure and resentment to feel that she had misjudged him and that he was finer and more conscientious than she had believed. Looking up at him as he

came towards her and bent his smooth, queer-shaped head over her hand, she felt that he was not indeed a weak man. His high, burly shoulders seemed to blot out the light as he bent over her, and his resemblance to some strong, mighty-muscled, sleek-furred, wild animal struck her afresh. When he had gone she turned out her light and lay rocked in the rush of the music of the storm, and the sense of shame died away in her relief at his nobility. If he had accepted her bribe, it would, she knew, have been good for Jimmy, but he had refused her bribe, and she felt that that, too, was good for the boy. So this brave, militant old woman went to sleep unable to make up her mind whether she was to be glad or sorry at the way her plan had fallen through.

Meantime, in the silence of the night, footsteps might have been heard coming towards the house. The limping messenger was on his way to Yellowleaf.

II

The next day being Sunday, Lily and the children went to church. Martin disappeared for the day; and after lunch, the sun having come out and the rain ceased, though the wind still blew hard, Aghassy and Jim went out for a long spin in the car, which they made a point of doing on Sunday afternoons, and Lily betook herself for a visit to a bed-ridden old governess of hers in Golder's Green. Lady Mary, left alone in the house, bade Bruno wheel her out into the glass gallery, and sat there in the sun, wrapped in a magnificent old tail-less ermine cape that she had had for over

twenty years. She was very depressed, which was a most unusual thing for her, and, her nature being what it was, her depression was abysmal. Her sky was black, and as was her way, she fed her gloom with reading. On her lap lay one of her green books—"Iphigenia in Tauris," that most magnificent and unrelieved of tragedies.

"Bruno," she said to the old man, "there is an old woman in this play who says she felt like a winter-frozen bee, and that's what I feel like to-day."

"Eccellenza," Bruno replied, "that old lady could not have felt like a winter-frozen bee in July." Then his face broke into a laugh and he added: "With respect speaking, unless it was in England!" He dearly loved a gibe at the English climate, and Lady Mary, who, although she had hardly been out of Yellowleaf for fifteen years, had in her younger days, seen pretty well every country in the world, fully sympathized with him in his animadversions against the sloppy London winter, and the chilly or wet London summer. For a few minutes she sat there studying the old man's profile as he gazed out on to the shadow-swept lawn; then she said: "Bruno, I am not happy about Signorino Jim."

"Neither am I," was the answer, and then, because he knew his mistress wanted his opinion, the old servant gave it to her.

"The Signorino ought to be at school, he ought to be with other boys; also he ought to be under discipline—discipline here he has none."

Lady Mary nodded. "Exactly. What do you think of Mr. Martin?"

"Mr. Martin does not count, Your Excellency. It's only Mr. Aghassy who counts."

Lady Mary interrupted with a purpose. "And Mrs. Aghassy," she said.

The old man turned, his lambent eyes full of sunshine, a beautiful, sincere smile exposing his teeth. "*Mr. Aghassy, Eccellenza,*" he insisted mildly.

Lady Mary reflected for a moment, not because she felt she was in any way lowering her dignity by taking counsel with this old servant, because he was friend as much as servant, and his dignity in its degree was as great as her own; but because she wished to order her own mind; to take from it the most important idea it held, and offer it to the old man's consideration.

"Mr. Aghassy consented to let Mr. Jim go to school if Mrs. Aghassy wished it," she said quietly. "It was Mrs. Aghassy who couldn't part with him." Bruno did not answer, so she was forced to go on. "Mr. Aghassy is very fond of the Signorino, Bruno. I am sure he would do anything he believed to be good for him."

Bruno looked at her, his brown face full of trouble. He remembered the day when he had stood by her chair in her Corner, looking at her as he thought she slept, hating himself for being the bearer of bad tidings. Now again he was the bearer of bad tidings.

"*Eccellenza,*" he said, with a little break in his voice, "the Signorina Lili is an angel—a beautiful angel of heaven; but," he added in Italian, "you must not believe her nowadays. The Signorina Lili is not telling the truth of late."

Lady Mary wasted no time in expostulations that she knew he could sweep away with a word. Instead, she asked him simply what he meant. "Go on," she said. "Tell me." And so Bruno told her.

It appeared that for many months past he had seen that Mrs. Aghassy was unhappy; worse—that she was frightened about something. "*You* would not see that, Eccellenza, because the Signorina Lili is afraid of your knowing, but she's not afraid of me, she has forgotten me; like all English people she forgets that servants have eyes and ears——"

"And tongues," broke in Lady Mary briskly. "Now there's Drake, for instance; if Drake didn't tremble before me, she would constantly say things—against you—for instance."

Bruno shrugged his shoulders slightly and thrust Drake aside, with a gesture, into the place of those who don't count.

"Shall I tell Your Excellency what I mean?" he went on mildly; and, on Lady Mary's nod, he did so. "Mr. Aghassy frightens the Signorina Lili; I think she's sorry she married him. She sits and thinks, and thinks, of my Captain. Mr. Jim is no longer the way he used to be with her. He thinks that she makes a fuss, that she stops his pleasure, that she treats him like a child; and it's Mr. Aghassy who teaches him this."

A deep flush rose over Lady Mary's face, and she threw her head up in a movement of imperious anger. "Bruno," she cried, "what are you talking about? You cannot *possibly* mean that he would speak against the boy's mother to him!"

“With his eyes, Eccellenza, with his eyes he speaks, Mr. Aghassy; by his voice, by his manner, by his gestures. Ah! furbo, furbissimo, he is, Signor Aghassy!”

“Furbo!” repeated Lady Mary under her breath. “Artful—sly.”

Presently she asked in a voice of extreme reasonableness: “What you have said is very grave, my friend. Are you sure it is just?”

The strong afternoon sun, in a patch of which the old fellow stood at the top of the steps, showed a tremor in his delicately cut face. He might have been a duke reprimanded by his sovereign lady, in the dignity in which he turned and answered her.

“Eccellenza, I am an old man. I was a middle-aged man when the Signorina Lili was a little child, and I used to carry her from the carriage to the door to keep her feet from the wet. With respect speaking, she was fond of me then, and trusted me, and I got to know her well; and now she herself is thirty-seven years old, and she has changed very little with the years. She is still almost a child in many ways, and I, whom she doesn’t suspect of trying to read her, can see more than you, to save whose happiness she tells”—he hesitated—“what is not true.”

And it seemed to the old woman in the wheel-chair as if for a very long time she, too, had known that her daughter-in-law was suffering in some secret part of her mind. A blaze of anger rose in her heart against Aghassy and against her grandson.

Things might have happened differently if those

two had come back just then, but the ring at the bell was not theirs. Bruno, when he had been gone a few minutes, came padding down the hall with a card on a little silver tray. "A lady would like to see Your Excellency," he said, the well-trained servant and nothing more.

Lady Mary looked at the card. "Mrs. Cuthbertson!" she said. "I don't know any Mrs. Cuthbertson, Bruno. I don't think I want to see her."

The man stood respectfully waiting for her to make up her mind. No one looking at them would have guessed how confidentially they had been talking three minutes before.

Lady Mary looked up at him. "Well, you little old imbecile," she said in Italian affectionately. "Tell me what you think, what is she like, who is she?"

And Bruno answered earnestly: "I have never seen this lady before, but I hope you will see her, Your Excellency."

CHAPTER IX

I

BRUNO would as soon have stood on his head in the middle of Regent Street as shown anyone on earth into the drawing-room before Lady Mary was there, so by the time he had wheeled her into her Corner and got back to the front hall, the strange lady had apparently become a little nervous, and, when the old man appeared, she said with a break in her voice: "If the lady doesn't want to see me, I can come some other time."

It was more than social discomfort she felt, and Bruno read flight in her eye, for with great firmness he ushered her, almost against her will, into the drawing-room and down its length round the corner.

Bruno's Latin tongue being incapable of coping with such a name as Cuthbertson, it would be unsafe to declare how he announced the stranger; but that mattered very little, and Lady Mary, in her gentlest voice, bade her caller sit down.

"I was out in the glass gallery there," she said. "And my butler had to wheel me in here. That is why you were kept waiting. I am sorry."

Mrs. Cuthbertson was a tall, finely built woman with a large, almost classically modelled face, and rich dark hair with a strong natural wave in it. Lady Mary judged her to be about forty. She was not badly dressed, and her hat must have cost a good deal of

money, with its badly applied birds of Paradise. She was plainly not a lady, but she by no means belonged to what Lady Mary in the innocence of her simple heart called the lower classes. She sat stiffly in the chair opposite her hostess, her large, well-shaped hands, in expensive pearl-coloured gloves, clutching each other nervously. It struck Lady Mary that she must have come to beg in some way, probably for some favourite charity of her own. The silence growing painful, the old lady spoke. "Won't you tell me," she said, "why you have come to see me?" and then ridiculously it struck her that Mrs. Cuthbertson would have been better pleased if she had asked to what she owed the honour of her visit.

"I hope you won't be angry with me, it's being Sunday and all—I came on purpose on Sunday because I knew that they would be out."

"Oh!" Something in her manner startled, almost alarmed Lady Mary. After over a minute she added: "I see. You mean Mr. and Mrs. Aghassy, or my grandson, James Dampierre?"

The woman started as if something had hurt her, and she swallowed hard. "Yes. I mean Mr. Aghassy and his wife."

Lady Mary, always tactful, always objective, paused for a moment, seeing the picture made by her guest and herself as it must have looked to an outsider. And then, in a momentary incarnation of Mrs. Cuthbertson, regarded herself, Lady Mary Dampierre, with a kind of nervous fear, so strange and menacing she knew she must look. Then she heard herself say slowly and in

the modulated, musical voice that she recognized as one of her most potent weapons: "Then you do not wish to see Mr. and Mrs. Aghassy?"

The layer of civilization seemed to slip away from Mrs. Cuthbertson at this question, and it was a **very** simple, decent, undefended creature who answered: "See him! My God, no! He'd skin me alive if he knew I had come here."

"Skin you alive!" Lady Mary murmured. "What a horrid thought! Would he indeed? Dear me! How extremely unpleasant!——" She let her voice trail away purposely into silence, and then added, suddenly sitting up in her chair and leaning forward, her weight on her hands which curved over the polished arms of her chair: "Then you *know* Jacques Aghassy?"

Her attack was so sudden that the less perfectly equipped Mrs. Cuthbertson flinched, and, so to speak, let fall her arrows and her shield. "Know him! Know him!" she stammered. "Well, you just look here——" Rising, she dragged at a chain round her neck until she withdrew from her bosom a flat gold locket, which opened with a snap under the nervous action of her grey suède fingers, and, bending over, thrust it into Lady Mary's hand.

"I can't get it off my neck," she said; "it's never been off my neck since he was born—Theodore, I mean——"

Lady Mary, whose only conscious feeling was one of having been there, and having felt all these painful sensations before, gazed for a moment at the roseate

child's face that smiled at her from the locket. "I see," she said gently, conscious chiefly of feeling an immense boredom, as one who listens to an old and undramatically told tale. "I see. Your little boy, and—Mr. Aghassy's. He looks—a charming child." To her distressed sight the locket and the big woman behind it seemed to melt away into a beneficent mist, as if Athene, the grey-eyed, had had a finger in the pie. She was conscious suddenly of her age; that she was seventy-nine years old—nine years over the span allotted to the old; she felt tired, without sinew; that her brain had had its day, that her resilience was gone; she felt that she, Mary Catherine Dampierre, stood at the stern of some old-fashioned ship traveling swiftly out into the unharvested sea, while under her eyes stood, on a receding shore, those she loved, beyond reach of her help and her wisdom. Never in her long life had she suffered as she suffered then. This dreadful thing, a thing that happened every day between the covers of novels, this thing now had happened to Lily Dampierre, her Lily: her son's wife. She was conscious in the very brief silence that followed Mrs. Cuthbertson's production of her locket that this dreadful thing had happened ever since the world began. There was Queen Eleanor, and the fair Rosamund; there was the unhappy German wife of the second Medici, Francis, and Bianca Capello; there was Perdita, and rumoured if not well-authenticated cases nearer to our own day. The world—a big green ball, floating in ether (which element she privately could not dissociate from the ether of evil smell used in hos-

pitals)—these evil things had been happening ever since the world began. Cleopatra, for instance, the hussy; Aspasia—— Then her mind cleared suddenly, and before her she saw, not the beautiful classic face that had captivated Jacques Aghassy; nor even the maternal angel, the mother of the dimpled Theodore in the locket; but a pair of large pale grey hands—paws, she called them, with her suddenly restored sense of humour—clasped tightly together on the shiny black Charmeuse knees.

"I don't quite see," she heard herself saying, "what I can do for you. I think if you knew my daughter-in-law—Mrs. Aghassy is my daughter-in-law——"

Mrs. Cuthbertson interrupted her eagerly. "Oh, I know all that, My Lady—Lady Mary, I mean. I have looked you all up in Debrett. That's where," she added with a sudden smile that gave a lovely curve to her mouth, "*we* have the pull over *you*."

Lady Mary knew exactly what she meant, so she wasted no time in asking her. "How old," she asked gently, "is your little boy?"

"He's three and a half. And mind yer," Mrs. Cuthbertson added, her fear having left her, "he's the dearest little chap."

"Why did you not marry Mr. Aghassy?"

Up Mrs. Cuthbertson's big, beautiful face—for it was beautiful, although worn and a little haggard—crept a most beautiful flush. "You see," she stammered, with an awkwardness that Lady Mary felt to be endearing, "my husband—he was post-master at Crevell in Gloucester—only died in 19—."

Lady Mary stiffened visibly in her chair. "In what month?" she asked.

"The fourteenth of July." There was a pause. This unknown man, this rural post-master, had died just four months before that day when Aghassy had brought the lilies of the valley to Yellowleaf; the day when Lily had promised to marry him. For a moment Lady Mary could have screamed, as most women of any world experience must have felt themselves at some period capable of screaming, not so much for the baseness and wickedness as for the thick-skinnedness of men. There was less indignation for her beloved Lily than for this poor, large, soft-throated Mrs. Cuthbertson, the mother of the poor little Theodore—the gift of God. "I—am sorry for you," she said slowly, "very sorry—but—" with an overwhelming desire for solitude—"I don't quite see how I can help you. If I can be of any use to you——" She paused, ashamed of her impulse and hoping that this meaning might have escaped the common woman opposite her.

But the common woman had understood. "But I don't mean that," poor Mrs. Cuthbertson said, twisting together her big hands to the serious detriment of those delicate gloves of hers. "I have not come here to beg, My Lady—I mean, Lady Mary. Only——" She swallowed so hard that Lady Mary could not decide whether she had heard or merely seen the swallow. "But I think—I think he ought to come to see us sometimes. And the boy is beginning to understand now. He's an awful big kid, too, and he asks about his 'Daddy' quite beautifully, and says 'Twinkle, twinkle,

little star!' and 'Simple Simon met a pieman.' " Out of the big, beautiful creature's eyes bubbled two great tears. "I came to ask you—and mind you, I don't want to make any trouble, and I would not *dream* of telling—her—but oh, My Lady—I did ought to say Lady Mary, only I forget—don't you think he ought to come to see us just once in a while?"

There was something exceedingly decent and dignified in the way the poor thing allowed the tears to slide uncontrolled down her cheeks. She was not ashamed of her grief, and in this Lady Mary sympathized.

"I do indeed think he ought to go and see you," the old lady declared with the fierce vigour peculiar to her. "It's perfectly abominable of him that he doesn't. How long is it since you have seen him?"

But Mrs. Cuthbertson took this partisanship in bad part.

"It's over six months since he's been—I thought he was in America until Easter, but—— Don't you think he's unkind?" she declared. "For he isn't. And he does love Theodore. You'd think so, too, if you could see them together! Of course, I couldn't expect him—a man like him—to marry me; and he never lied to me," she added proudly. "He never pretended he would marry me. I always knew he would have to marry somebody rich some day."

Lady Mary leaned forward in her chair. "Rich!" she echoed. "Now you are wronging him, you poor thing! If there's one thing Jacques Aghassy cares nothing about, it's money."

Into the wide, rather stupid grey eyes of the woman

opposite her came a look of such honest incredulity and amazement that Lady Mary was struck dumb, and before she could speak Mrs. Cuthbertson had taken up the word.

"Him not care for money! Why it's the one thing in the world he does care for. He loves it! That is one reason," she added, "why he stuck to me so long. I never wanted much, you see."

Lady Mary could well believe it. It was a generous, unacquisitive face she saw there in the high-backed chair, and she felt as many people have felt before her, that the gods were mixing up the rôles in the little drama with a curious lack of discrimination. She, Lady Mary Dampierre, being on this occasion the undeclared representative of the wife in the case, should have had right whole-heartedly on her side, and this splendid-looking Mrs. Cuthbertson, the social outlaw, the mistress, the adulteress, should have been definitely and fully in the wrong; but things had not happened in this way, and the law-breaking mother of the without-any-legal-status-gift-of-God Theodore seemed by some twist of circumstances to be without calculation, and in all simplicity very much in the right.

Then suddenly Lady Mary realized the absurdity of the whole thing—the absurdity of her, Lady Mary Dampierre, knowing anything about this sentimental free-booter; the absurdity of the free-booter sitting there in the corner; the absurdity of the free-booter knowing that at this hour Aghassy would be out. The whole ridiculous, vulgar jumble struck the old lady so strongly that for a moment she felt almost faint.

"But what can I do for you?" she asked. "If you want to make mischief it is not to me that you should have come, but to Mr. Aghassy's wife, who, as you know, thanks to your familiarity with Debrett, was my dearly loved only son's wife, before she married your son's father."

But Mrs. Cuthbertson could see no humour in the situation.

"I don't know," she murmured. "I suppose I oughtn't to have come, but I thought perhaps you could make him see that he ought to come and see Theodore. After all, it isn't Theodore's fault, and a father is a father—or ought to be."

"Or ought to be," Lady Mary echoed grimly. "Then you would like me to tell Mr. Aghassy that you have been here and that you wish to see him?"

Mrs. Cuthbertson nodded.

"Have you written to him?"

Again Mrs. Cuthbertson nodded. "Hundreds of times. Only not *here*, of course. I have written to his club. He would not have liked it," she added in a matter-of-fact voice, "if I had written here."

There was a long pause. And then Lady Mary said: "I am very sorry for you, but I must have time to think before I take any step in the matter. I very much appreciate your not trying to see or communicate with my daughter-in-law."

Mrs. Cuthbertson rose, and the blankness of her face at the old lady's speech was in its way a fine testimony to her honesty.

"Why should I write to your daughter-in-law?"

she asked roughly. "It would be worse for her than it is for me, if she knew."

Lady Mary's eyes filled with uncontrollable tears at this ineloquent little speech, and she was about to make some sympathetic remark when a burst of voices and laughter in the hall froze the cords in her throat. "It is—they have all come back together," she said. "You don't want to see them, I suppose?"

"My God, no!" breathed the easily articulate Mrs. Cuthbertson. Lady Mary turned and pointed to the door over her shoulder. "Go in there," she said; "that's my bedroom. The old man who let you in, will let you out. Write to me and give me your address. Oh, your poor thing!" she went on, breaking off to add, as the noise of voices grew louder: "Be quick! Run!"

As the door shut softly she rang, and Bruno came hurrying down the long room. There was a quick exchange of words. The old man closed the door leading into the glass gallery and drew the old gold silken curtains, thus shutting out all view of the gallery and the garden. Five minutes later, as Aghassy and Jim, both correctly dressed for riding, and Lily, who on her way home had met them at the doorstep, sat round Lady Mary's generously spread tea-table, the old lady's sharp ear caught a very faint sound of footsteps going away from her room, and for a moment she was silent and a little absent-minded, her dark eyes fixed on Aghassy's face. Then suddenly she realized the strength of the cards Chance had thrust into her hand, and her face changed subtly as she looked at the little

group. Now she would see whether Aghassy would agree to Charles Thorn's return! She had tried bribery and failed. Now, with a little chuckle, she commended to herself the idea of blackmail.

II

Lady Mary went to her room to dress for dinner without having said a word to anybody about her singular call. She was extremely angry, as well as distressed, by this proof of Aghassy's duplicity towards Lily, for she made no mistake as to the full meaning of Mrs. Cuthbertson's story, and it was disconcerting as well as insulting that all the man's apparent rectitude of life and domestic tastes should prove to have been only a pose. But the fair-minded old woman was even more angry about his treatment of his own child than she was about his behaviour towards her daughter-in-law. For she was far too wise to have expected Lily to have been the first woman in the life of a man like Aghassy, and she found on reflection that what she had thought, as her first suspicions of him were lulled into tranquillity by the immense cleverness of his sustained, unfaltering course of deceit, was that, after the usual storms and adventures of young manhood, he had settled down with extraordinary ease into his new life of rather dull respectability. Now she found, as Drake dressed her, and her mind went on working rapidly, that she had unconsciously admired the man for his strength in living an existence that she had instinctively known to be strange and difficult for him.

All sorts of old impressions that she had thought effaced came back to her now with startling clearness, through the knowledge that she had gained by poor Mrs. Cuthbertson's visit. Mrs. Cuthbertson's story had acted like acid on the sensitive plate of her mind. She had an odd kind of feeling that she was not seeing things that were new to her, but remembering things that she had always known, and disregarded.

Drake, the woman with the pinched red nose, and hard fingers that were as cold as ice all the year round, went through her various duties with the comfortable dexterity for the sake of which her mistress overlooked her disagreeable expression of bad-temper. Drake said not a word but, like the immortal bird, she thought a great deal, and once Lady Mary, catching a cold light in a swift sidelong glance, allowed herself the mental refreshment of a remark.

"Poor Drake!" she said. "You see quite plainly that something has happened. And you would so like to know what it is!"

Drake's correct refutation of this diagnosis of her mind fell on deaf ears, for Lady Mary was once more deep in thought, and finally, when Bruno knocked at her door to take her into the dining-room, there was a wicked light in her old eye, and in her pale cheeks a little flush as of anticipated triumph.

"Bruno," she said, during her slow progress down the hall, "I heard of a piece of slang the other day, derived, I believe, from the music-halls—to say that a person's 'number is up.'"

Bruno knew, and translated the phrase into its

Italian equivalent with perfect sang-froid. He never came for Lady Mary until everybody else was at table, and now, as they drew near the dining-room door, she stopped their progress for a moment and he came round in front of her, as he always did when she spoke with him, for he did not consider it polite to stand behind her.

“You will be glad to know, Bruno,” she said in an undertone, “that Mr. Martin’s number is up.”

CHAPTER X

I

FOR some reason Aghassy was in high feather that night. He was in one of the moods when his queer face might almost have been called handsome. He and Jim both always dressed for dinner; Lily was in a pretty new frock of silver-grey transparent stuff, that fell in soft folds round her Tanagra-statuettes-like figure. Lady Mary noticed at once that they were having champagne; the old-fashioned mahogany wine-cooler was drawn up between Aghassy and his wife. The old lady ate her soup in almost unbroken silence, listening to Aghassy's talk with Jim, which was chiefly about their motor ride that afternoon. They had gone down into Surrey to see some friends of Aghassy's, it seemed, and it had all been very amusing and delightful.

"Jim's made great friends with a youth named Percy Randall, who has invited him down to his father's to stay for the week-end next week," Aghassy announced carelessly after a while.

"Who is he?" It was Lily who spoke, her small, non-committal face bent over her plate.

"Well, according to you, I suppose," her husband answered a little boisterously, "he's nobody at all. His father's a very successful stock-broker; and the boy himself—he's about twenty, I should think—is in his father's office."

"I am not a snob, Jacques," Lily said gently. "You

know I'm not, and that is not what I meant. Do you *like* him? Is he *nice*?"

Aghassy shrugged his shoulders. "Nice!—I think so. I don't know very much about him. He's an agreeable, jolly young fellow. I thought," he added, looking at Lady Mary with a little smile of perfectly polite raillery, "that you would all be pleased to hear of Jim's going about a bit with other young men!"

At this delightful epithet young Jim straightened himself up, trying to hide a gratified smile; but Lily, without looking at him, said to her husband gently: "Jim is not a young man, Jacques. Are you, Jinks?"

The smile was a little wistful, and when the boy disregarded it with an impatient frown, Lady Mary would have been delighted to ring his neck.

"You are always trying to make me out a kid, Mother. After all, I shall be seventeen in a couple of months."

Lady Mary's voice, as she spoke, was very musical, but it was cold. "I was always under the impression that your birthday was in October, Jim."

The boy's lips were still in the loose stage of male children's before the tightening up of the muscles that comes with early manhood. He frowned again; he more than frowned, he pouted. "In *three* months, then," he muttered.

"Boys of sixteen years and nine months are certainly not old enough to choose their own friends," put in Aghassy adroitly. "That is all your mother means; but I'm sure, when I tell her that young Randall is a very charming fellow, she will have no objec-

tion to your going down there for the week-end, particularly as his father is a very old friend of mine."

Her eyes no longer held by ignorance, Lady Mary saw all too plainly that Lily was made very unhappy and very uneasy by this conversation. Last night she might not have noticed it, for her daughter-in-law's little face was perfectly composed and did not change colour; but now, in her new knowledge, acquired of Bruno and Mrs. Cuthbertson, she felt all the tension and the under-currents most acutely, and she regretted Lily's next speech.

"I'm sure, Jacques, that he's nice if you think so; only, as Jim is so very young, won't you ask this young man to spend the week-end here with us?"

Aghassy, who had risen and taken a bottle of champagne out of its icy nest, wrapped his napkin round its neck before he answered. Then he gave one twist of the corkscrew, after he had cut the wire, and looked up. "Just as you like, my dear. He's *your* son—and mine only through affection—but you will forgive me saying that if he *were* my son I should give him a little more freedom. Jim is old for his age, and he's nearly six feet tall, and I don't think—" he hesitated, as if searching for the word—"molly-coddling is good for him."

At this the boy's sullen excitement broke bounds, and he burst out into a nervous, high-pitched clamour of protest and criticism of his mother and her ideas about him. "That's always the way, always the way! Jacques understands. So does Martin. It's only you who think I'm going to stay a baby for ever. I wonder

you don't make me wear my hair long, and a lace collar, like that little beast in the book!"

"Oh, darling!" protested Lily, leaning across the table, her eyes starry with kept-back tears. "You don't understand, neither does Jacques. You know that Arthur Hesketh always says that we must keep you quiet and take care of your health——"

But the boy had evidently a good deal of pent-up resentment to get rid of, and, paying no heed to her, he went on with his rapid, unjust, youthful arraignment. He was sick and tired of it, he was as tall as most fellows of twenty, and he wasn't going to be treated like a kid any more——

His poor little mother looked positively beaten down by his words, like, Lady Mary thought, some delicate flower in a hail-storm. It was Aghassy who ended the scene, for Lady Mary was afraid to speak lest she might lose her temper.

"Here, old man, enough of that now! You're hurting your mother's feelings, and that's being like a baby, and not a man." He handed a brimming glass of wine across to the boy and bade him drink it. "Now then, Lily, you take this."

The storm was over, but it had been one of those horrid storms that leave the sky as dark and menacing as when they begin, and for a moment there was silence as Bruno came back into the room and proceeded about his duties. The wine did not quiet young Jim's nerves, but it changed the nature of his excitement, and in a few minutes he was shouting with laughter, and Aghassy filled his glass again. When dinner was

nearly over, the boy remembered that the question of his week-end was still unsettled,

"Well," he asked suddenly, of nobody in particular, "am I to be allowed to go down to the 'Bee-hive,' or not?"

Aghassy frowned at him benevolently. "That's all right. That's all right, old chap. Don't you worry! I will make your mother understand."

Jim thanked him with a look, and then added with assumed carelessness: "By the way, I forgot to tell you I promised to dine with him—Randall, I mean—on Tuesday and go to a play."

Nobody spoke, and the pause threatened to become an unmanageable silence, when Lady Mary, after drawing a deep breath and fixing her eyes on Aghassy, said: "By way of changing the subject of this disturbing Mr. Randall, I must tell you about a visit I had this afternoon."

Lily smiled at her gratefully. "Yes, Mamma. Who was it! Not Arthur Hesketh? I should be sorry to have missed him."

Lady Mary shook her head and helped herself to an olive.

"Oh no. It wasn't he. It was a Mrs. Cuthbertson," and she went on eating her olive.

"I don't think I know her, do I?" Lily asked politely, assuming the virtue of an interest that it was plain she did not feel.

Aghassy filled his glass with wine, filled it to the brim, and then carried it slowly, with admirable steadiness, to his lips. Young Jim, who felt that his grand-

mother, who had lately been not very satisfactory to him, had, in the matter of his evening out, come to his rescue with some kindness, asked hastily with the rush of words by which the very young mistakenly believe that they conceal perturbation: "Isn't she the mother of those red-headed twins who came to lunch just before Christmas?"

Lady Mary shook her head, her eyes fixed, with a dancing-devil of malice in each of them, on Aghassy's impenetrable face. He was cracking nuts and eating them with every appearance of enjoyment and serenity, but she knew that her shaft must have hit him very, very hard, and she rejoiced exceedingly.

"No," she said, "their name was Wilkinson. Not a bad guess for *you*, Jinks! This lady, who by the way was extremely good-looking, and whom I liked very much, was in trouble, private trouble, about which I mayn't tell you, and she came to ask me to help her."

"Begging, I suppose," suggested Lily, not at all unkindly.

"No, she doesn't want money. She seems a generous creature, not at all *that* kind. It was a very sad story she told me——"

Dinner was over, and Bruno had gone to prepare the coffee that they always drank in the drawing-room; Aghassy laid down the nut-crackers very softly, and spoke. "I hope," he said, "that you are going to be able to assist this poor lady?"

Lady Mary met his eye, and not without admiration answered him, as the door opened and Bruno came in and took his place behind her chair. "Yes," she said

quietly, "I think I shall be able to help her; I am very glad for several reasons that she came to see me."

Aghassy opened the door and followed his nephew into the drawing-room. Lily followed them; and, after a moment, Bruno pushed her chair out of the door and down the long hall.

II

Charles Thorn came back the next afternoon, but, instead of arriving at two, he missed the train and did not get in till nearly dinner-time. It was a bitterly cold summer's day, and the heavy, dark clouds seemed surcharged with anger. Thorn, who had come from the station with his bag on the top of a bus, went first to Bruton Street and looked through his letters, and then walked to St. John's Wood.

The minute he set foot in the house, he smelt mischief.

"Hullo, Bruno," he said, "what is up? Has anything happened?"

The old man, who wore an odd look of suppressed excitement and expectancy, shrugged his shoulders. "I have been told nothing, Mr. Thorn," he said, "but I think it's about the Signorino."

Thorn laughed harshly. "Naturally it would be. Poor little Jimmy!" Then he went straight to the drawing-room without being announced.

Lady Mary, whose huge piece of embroidery had been, so to speak, on the stocks for some years, and who usually worked at it in a very leisurely if not languid way, was stabbing at it with furious energy

as he went in, and when she saw him she made such a strong gesture of relief and welcome that her thimble flew off her finger and bounced half-way across to the hall-door.

"Thank God!" she said. "You have come back at last."

Thorn, although at times a frantically vehement person himself, was always amused at the vehemence of others, so his bony face softened as he picked up the thimble and gave it to his aunt, and then sat down.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

Lady Mary pulled herself together. "Nothing, except that I'm delighted to see you back."

"So it seems. A simple dog like me might suspect you of being gladder to see me to-day after three days' absence, than you were when I returned after being away for two years! How is Lily?" he asked abruptly.

"Lily's—the same as usual."

"And Jim?"

"Ah!" A little smile crept round Lady Mary's mouth. "Jim is the emancipated one. He is dining out and going to a play with a young man to-morrow."

Thorn stared. "What young man?"

"Some friend of Jacques."

"Oh! Trouble brewing, is there?"

"Brewed!" confirmed the old lady succinctly.

Then the door opened and Aghassy and Lily came in. They had been out together, and she still wore her hat.

"Hullo, dear colleague!" Aghassy cried gaily.

"So you are back." He had a fresh colour, looked thoroughly serene and unmoved. Lady Mary could have torn the eyes out of his face in her impotent rage. She knew he was beaten; he must be troubled by mere hard facts. And yet here he was as serene and bright as the typical, though not altogether correctly imagined, bridegroom going forth to his bride.

It appeared that he and Lily had been to see the collection of Spanish pictures at Goupil's; then they had had tea at Rumpelmayer's, and been struck by the extreme plainness of all the little Minnas and Josephines who had come in there, accompanied by callow youths.

"If a woman isn't good," Aghassy declared gaily, "she ought to be put to death unless she can at least fool people into thinking her pretty!"

Lady Mary looked at him and he looked at her. Neither of them spoke. Even Lily noticed something in the atmosphere, and turned her eyes from one to the other in innocent inquiry. Then she rose, and walking to the end of the room looked out across the glass gallery into the twilit garden.

"Oh, there's a new moon!" she cried. "Come along, Charles, let's go and wish."

He followed her without a word, and Lady Mary and Aghassy were alone.

"I hope," Aghassy said pleasantly, "that she didn't see the moon through the glass. That might, you know, have disturbed the peace of the whole household!"

"Yes it might." It seemed to the old woman,

strong and self-contained though she was, that if he didn't break his maddening silence on the subject of Mrs. Cuthbertson she would be goaded into some desperate indiscretion. Setting her teeth hard, she drove her needle fiercely through the taut canvas, the silk whistling as she did so.

"I always think," Aghassy said serenely, after a pause, "that your Corner is at its very best at this hour of a summer afternoon." Then seeing that she made no reply, he rose deliberately. "I'm afraid I'm boring you with my artless prattle," he went on. "I will go and join Lily, and make my bow to the new moon. It's always well, don't you think," he added, turning half-way to the door, "to be on the right side of the gods!"

III

As Lady Mary sat reading in bed late that night, after a perfectly uneventful evening, during which Charles and Aghassy and his wife all sat with her, saying good-night to her a little after ten, when Thorn went home, her door was suddenly burst open after a hurried knock, to which she had not had time to answer, and Bruno came in. The old man was violently agitated. His face was white, and looked as if it had been freshly powdered, as those bronze Southern skins do under stress of strong feeling, and his eyes blazed in his head.

"Eccellenza! Eccellenza!" he cried. "An apoplexy on him! May he die without confession! He has killed my poor little dog, my poor, good, faithful little Risotto."

He spoke in Italian, and as if his nearness to his old mistress had softened a little the angry fire in his heart, tears rolled out of his eyes. There was no need for Lady Mary to ask whom he meant. She knew. "Tell me about it, Bruno, tell me," she said gently, speaking in Italian as he had done. "Sit down, sit down there, and tell me about it."

"Signora, I have known all the evening that there was something. He has been dreadful, and I have been afraid of him."

"Hush!" she said gently. "He has been with me all the evening, and he has been quite quiet."

"Quiet!" Bruno's gesture was expressive of the most respectful scorn for his mistress's power of observation. "The quieter he is, the more dreadful! You don't know him, Eccellenza. But *I* know, and the Signorina Lili knows. While they were in the garden before dinner looking at the moon, she knew, and she trembled as she went upstairs. I saw her poor hand on the bannisters——"

"Never mind that, Bruno. Never mind. Tell me about the dog."

And Bruno told her. About half an hour before, he had gone out, as was his habit, to give his little friend a run before going to bed; the garden was dark, the moon being so little, and Aghassy, who had gone out after leaving the drawing-room, had come back opened the garden door quietly, and walked without noise across the grass at the side of the gravel-path.

"He didn't want the Signora to know he had been out. Ah, Eccellenza, I know, I know, I have seen!

And then, as he crept so quickly, so quietly to the door, his latch-key already in his hand, my poor little Risotto, whom he had not seen, ran up to him; poor beast, *he* didn't know him, either, and he ran up to greet him; then somehow," the old man's voice shook, and he suddenly looked very, very old, "in the darkness Signor Aghassy stumbled over the dog and fell, and his stick made a loud clatter on the steps; and then, and then, Signora, that devil that's in him, that awful devil, broke out, and he killed my little dog."

"With—with his stick, you mean?" Lady Mary gasped, horrified, and unable to prevent herself being influenced by the old servant's terror.

He rose, and coming to the bed, leaned over and whispered a few words, words that filled his listener with fear such as she had never known before.

"No, no! Not with his stick! A Christian would kill a dog with a stick. He—he took him up in his hands as if he had been a man and choked him!"

CHAPTER XI

I

ALL night the poor old lady was awake, her mind beating like a pendulum from side to side. Should she tell Charles about this most atrocious business of the little dog, or should she not? She had never intended to tell him about Mrs. Cuthbertson, for she felt that she had no right to give her away, as the saying goes. Mrs. Cuthbertson was an outsider; her affairs, sad and interesting though they were, did not touch Yellowleaf in any intimate sense, Aghassy being, Lady Mary felt with unconscious pride, only an outsider, although he had forced his way in, and so troubled its very depths.

But this matter of Bruno and his little dog was different. Bruno, far more than Aghassy, belonged to Lady Mary, and was a part of her life. She paid him for his services, but for his friendship and affection she and her family, she knew, could never pay him by mere money; his reward must be in their sympathy in his joys and his sorrows, and this manner of the little dog could not by them be disregarded. But Charles! Charles Thorn, with his wild and dangerous temper! Would it be safe to tell him? Sometimes, during that long night, the silver-voiced clock on the mantelpiece said, "Yes, tell him," and sometimes it said warningly, "No, don't tell him."

So that when Lady Mary Dampierre woke up in

the morning her night had been so troubled, her sleep so broken, that there was in her old face a change only to be expressed by the word awful in its right sense. Even the hard-visaged, hard-hearted, tough-nerved Drake was alarmed by the sight of her old mistress's face, and alarmed by the sound of her old mistress's voice.

"You haven't slept, My Lady; I know you haven't," the woman said almost fiercely; "and I don't hardly think you'd ought to get up."

"Oh, Drake, my poor Drake," Lady Mary groaned, "you mean you *do* think I ought not to get up! Well, perhaps you're right. The marrow in my bones seems to have melted, and my muscles are made of tallow. Yes, I'll stay in bed to-day."

Lady Mary's staying in bed was an event so unusual as to partake of the alarming. Shortly after her announcement Lily came in, followed by Jim, anxiety written all over their two faces, to the utter swamping of the anxiety and resentment that had been, to the old lady's shrewd eyes, very visible twelve hours before.

"But, Mamma," Mrs. Aghassy murmured, her little face ravaged with anxiety, "what's the matter? Drake told Bruno that you—that you are not at all well. Hadn't I better telephone for Arthur Hesketh?"

Lady Mary waved her hands—and even they looked a little pale—in repudiation of Arthur Hesketh and all his possible works.

"All doctors," she murmured, "are damned fools, as I should say if I had not the misfortune to be an old woman and an old lady—even Arthur Hesketh. I

slept badly, Lily, and I had ugly dreams; but why should not I, at my age?" Then she added with a twinkle in her old eyes, turning to Jim: "Darling, it was you I dreamt about. Ah, Jimmy, when you are so like your father as you are, couldn't you manage, you little devil, to be more like him?"

All the incipient, wrong kind of manhood had been frightened out of the boy by the news of his grandmother's illness, and his funny little eyes, which the night before at dinner had been so full of mannish pretensions and tyranny, were now the frightened, near-to-tears eyes of a loving child.

"Oh, Granny," he said, "are you all right?"

She smiled at him, her long lashes flickering with tender amusement. "Yes, my darling. Your poor old grandmother is too tough to be killed by the bad dreams of a single night. Jimmy—Jinks—suppose I had been very ill, would you really have minded, my son?"

Jimmy frowned with embarrassment, and his pulpy mouth puckered in a babyish way that somehow cheered the tormented hearts of the two women.

"Oh, Grandmamma," he said, "you know I should—would—should——"

Lady Mary held out a hot, dry little hand and took hold of his young, soft, warm one. "You have been a beastly boy of late," she said, "a selfish little monster, and I have been ashamed of you. My son, James Geoffrey Dampierre, your father, would have cut out his tongue rather than speak to me as I had the misery of hearing you speak to your mother the night before last."

Young Jim blurted out something about being sorry; and wishing he had not done it; and—and—— Then he broke down and, to the infinite relief and thanksgiving of the old woman and the young one, babyish tears crowded into his eyes and rolled down his childish cheeks, while his lips quivered in unrestrained, grotesque grief, curling back like an unhappy baby's. Lady Mary and Lily were both much happier, such being the nature of women, after this episode. Jim seemed to have come back to them, to have grown nearer, to be a more palpable, understandable boy, than he had been for months; and as to him himself, he was still young enough and simple enough to feel the happier for his breakdown in his progression towards the selfishness of full manhood.

In the end Lady Mary did not tell Thorn about the little dog; and this was not because she feared an outburst of justifiable rage from him, although that possibility was very present in her mind, but because in the first place he did not return until two days later, owing to some sudden bit of business a Oving-Wellow, and that when he did come he had not been in the house five minutes before things were taken out of the old lady's hands in a very singular and surprising way.

She had been in bed for two days, less because she felt ill than because it was the only way in which she could avoid seeing Aghassy.

The two days had passed on the whole rather pleasantly, for Aghassy had been at Windsor playing before some guests of the King and Queen, and then gone on to spend a day with some old friends near

Maidenhead; and to everybody's surprise, the "maggot" had asked for leave to go to Norwich to see his mother, who, it appears, was not well. So for twenty-four hours the two women and Jimmy were by themselves. It was a very stormy day, and they felt completely shut away from the world, and Jimmy, who had been thoroughly frightened about his grandmother, and who could not get used to the sight of that intrepid old warrior in bed, seemed to have gone back to the days before Aghassy's coming, and was gentle, and simple, and affectionate. Of his own free will he telephoned to Mr. Percy Randall, putting off their little festivity on the grounds of his grandmother's illness; and the question of his week-end at the "Beehive" had been tacitly dropped by everybody.

That last afternoon of Thorn's absence the boy had brought his sketches and attempts at pictures down to his grandmother's room, and accepted the admiration and criticism of the two women very sweetly. He had undoubtedly a good deal of talent, and there was a rough strength in his uncouth attempts at composition that pleased Lady Mary very much. For she knew about pictures, though not very profoundly, and had loved them all her life.

Lily went out early in the afternoon in her car, and bought all sorts of cakes and chocolates, so that tea was a kind of high festival; and Jimmy stuffed himself with such childish greed, and such a disregard of possible consequences, that his mother and grandmother kept exchanging glances of delight and relief. After all he wasn't so very grown-up!

Aghassy was to be back before dinner, and Lady Mary had made up her mind to get up before he came; so after tea Jimmy and his mother carried his sketches and canvasses upstairs, talking happily together, and the old lady rang for Drake. That grim functionary knew about the little dog; all the servants knew, but neither Lily nor Jim had been told. Drake for some reason, possibly because she detested Bruno, was a strong partisan of Aghassy, and it was characteristic of the woman that she had hated the poor little Risotto because not he, but his predecessor, Polenta, had once made a tentative snap at her very unalluring ankles.

"Bruno," she remarked, as she pinned a piece of priceless old lace over her mistress's hair, "has been going on like anything again about his nawsty little dog. It's my belief he'd like to do the master an injury if he could!"

"Nonsense, Drake!" Lady Mary spoke sharply.

The woman sniffed. "Beg pardon, My Lady, I'm sure," she said resentfully, "but I'm sure you'd think so yourself if you could 'ear the way he's going on. No doubt the nawsty little brute tried to bite the master, the same as the other one did me. All those little yellow dogs 'as 'orrid tempers!"

Lady Mary wished to be installed in her Corner before Aghassy got back, so she now rang for Bruno to wheel her into the drawing-room. "I would not say any more about poor little Risotto, Bruno," she suggested kindly as he adjusted her embroidery frame.

The old man raised his heavy, mournful brown eyes. "Eccellenza, I am sorry. It's Drake who has

been telling you, but she goaded me into it with her praising up master, and saying evil things about my little dog. She's a woman," he added in Italian, closing the subject with a very injurious Italian epithet, "without education."

II

Lily and Jim came down a few minutes later as they had gone upstairs, together, and the old lady's heart drew up in her breast as she saw how happy and relieved her daughter-in-law looked. Jimmy, who of late had been smoking a good deal, lit a cigarette now, with a glance at his grandmother, and sat down.

"Jinks," the old lady said, "too much of that, you know, is bad."

He grinned a cheerful boyish grin. "Oh, grandmother, everybody smokes! Jacques says it's very good for the nerves."

Lily rose, and going to him bent down and kissed him. She was looking extremely pretty, for she wore for the first time a delightful shell-pink tea-gown, whose cut and colour were exactly right for her. Lady Mary knew that it was put on in order that she might please the eyes of her son.

"Jim," she said coaxingly, her small hands patting his shoulders, "throw it away; don't smoke so much. Jacques may be right; they probably are good for *his* nerves—but—if you only knew how sick I am of the smell! Sometimes I feel as if my nose was full of it, and I just hate it."

The boy stared at her. "Good gracious, Mother!" he cried, "why did you never say so before?" He

threw his cigarette into the big hearth, where a fire was burning. "Why don't you tell Jacques? He smokes like a furnace all over the house, and I'm sure he wouldn't if he knew you didn't like it."

The light and colour seemed to ebb away from her face, and she went to her chair. "No, no!" she said. "I couldn't tell Jacques, and mind you don't say a word about it to him. Only I shall really be grateful, Jinks dear, quite as much for my own sake as for yours, if you will smoke less."

Just then Thorn arrived, not to dine, but to tell his aunt the result of his work at Oving-Wellow. He at once felt the change in the atmosphere, and slapped Jim heartily on the back and smiled at him, that sincere, heart-felt smile that softened and sweetened his odd rugged face.

"You look—very well, Lily," he then said.

She blushed, and Jim saw it. "She's dressed up in honour of Jacques' return!" the boy cried delightedly.

"Where's Aghassy been?" Thorn asked, while Lady Mary and Lily exchanged a look that meant "how like a boy!"

It was Lady Mary who explained Aghassy's absence; and then, while Lily surprised him with the news that his aunt had been in bed for two days, the door opened and the "maggot" came in again, looking, it struck them all, rather more of a worm than usual, for he had a cold, and his nose was red and his eyes watery, these worm-like manifestations not improving his appearance.

In spite of this, however, he came within a hair's-

breadth of being kissed by Lady Mary as he sat down by her, after shaking hands, for what he said was: "I—shall have to ask Mrs. Aghassy to look out for a new tutor for Jim."

If he had brought the moon in on a plate it could not have caused more astonishment than did this simple statement.

Lily, Jim, and Charles Thorn burst into a chorus of questions, but Lady Mary, after the first shock, smelt a rat; in other words, she knew that her clever enemy was doing her out, through this move, of her revenge. He was in her power, and he was obliged to give way in the matter of the "maggot," but her conquest was robbed of most of its glory by the way in which he had done it.

While Martin was explaining that, whereas his mother was not seriously ill, she wished him to stay in Norwich with her; that for a long time he had been thinking he ought to be near her; and that his shock at her condition had urged him to this sudden and painful determination—while all these incongruous reasons were being offered one after the other in the nervous haste common to honest people when forced into unpleasant circumstances of duplicity, Lady Mary watched Thorn's face. He was evidently puzzled, but said nothing, and when a moment later Aghassy came in, it was Jim who, with real regret, told him the news. Lady Mary, vexed though she was by being done out of her just revenge, was obliged to concede to him her sincere admiration for the manner in which he went through what she knew to be his part; he did not make the mistake of appearing too sur-

prised, nor were his regrets over vociferous. Lily and her son accepted in perfect good faith the fact that he was sorry to lose Martin, whom he liked, but that he was by no means in despair over the misfortune; and, in the middle of dinner, to which he had pleasantly insisted on Thorn's staying, he closed the subject in a masterly way, leaving no reason why it should ever be opened again, by saying quietly: "I hope, Thorn, that you will help us out of the difficulty, like a good fellow, by moving back into your old quarters, and undertaking this long-legged loon and his education."

Charles hesitated, his face set rather grimly, and, after a moment, said he was afraid he could not give up his rooms, in which he had just got comfortably settled; but Jimmy, who after all was very fond of him, added his voice to the arguments, urging his old tutor to come, and Lily, when ordered good-naturedly by her husband to add her entreaties to theirs, did so by saying simply: "Don't bother him now, Jacques. I know he will come. I know Charles."

Then Thorn turned helplessly to Lady Mary and asked her what she thought.

"I think," the old woman said, meeting Aghassy's eyes, in which there was positively a laugh, "that Jacques has won the game."

III

Jacques Aghassy had won the game, and Lady Mary was far too wily to lay herself open to any further proof of it by saying anything more about the matter; and after all, her point was won as well. Charles Thorn had come back—carting all his books

and other possessions, in various taxis—and settled down once more in his old rooms, and the reign of Martin was a thing of the past, leaving, so to speak, only the faintest rapidly disappearing tracks on the water. The new régime began in a most satisfactory way; Jim was extremely biddable in the right hands, and Thorn's were the right ones; hardly a month had passed before the boy seemed to have lost all his alarming, unpleasant symptoms. He even looked better physically. For a long time Lady Mary kept her watchful eye very wide open to spy out the first signs of any interference or opposition on Aghassy's part, but no interference nor opposition manifested themselves.

Aghassy, who was extremely busy, practising hours every day, and keeping himself fit with riding and walking, seemed perfectly content to leave the boy entirely in Charles' hands. Once he even said to his wife, as they and Lady Mary drank their tea, a fine afternoon, on the lawn, that he believed she had been right after all about poor Martin. "I don't believe he *was* strong enough for Jinks," he added thoughtfully.

His face was in full sunlight as he spoke, and there was in its inscrutability something almost inhuman, the old woman thought, as she glanced at him.

They were in August now, and the gaudy late summer flowers were in all their crude splendour.

Lady Mary, who sat with her back to the house, looked down the long garden with a certain little melancholy. It had not been much of a summer; twice the flowers had been devastated by frost, and torrential rains had played the dickens with the gravel paths; but, after all, it had been a summer of a sort,

and now it was on its last legs, she thought mournfully, for there is nothing sadder than autumn, except spring.

"We shan't be having tea out of doors many times again," Lily said gently. "I am glad Picotee will be back in time to see a few flowers. I have missed her."

Picotee had gone down to Brittany with one of her school-friends, on the breaking-up of her school, and was to get back the next day. As the two women chatted about the changes they expected to find in the child, who was just fifteen, Lady Mary happened to glance again at Aghassy, who was facing the house. Even as she watched him she knew that she could never put into words what the look in his face was making her feel; it was partly admiration for his immense imperturbability, partly something very like hatred, but the strongest element of it was that awful, cold dread she had felt years ago—that day in the hall when she had her arms full of spring flowers, the day that Jim and Thorn had seen the first crocus of the season.

Aghassy did not move; nothing in his face seemed to strike his wife; he seemed hardly to breathe, in the tenseness of the moment; it was as if the feeling that had come over him had turned him to stone. He didn't look like a man; he looked like a statue. For a long, long moment the old woman sat there stricken with a hideous, inexpressible fear. She knew, without turning to look, what the man's face meant, and Lily's voice sounded at once miles away and inordinately loud.

"Oh, here is Charles," Lily said.

CHAPTER XII

I

PICOTEE'S return the next day brought welcome diversion to everybody. She had grown taller, and looked less monumental; her ankles were thinning satisfactorily, and her figure beginning to bud and curve in a way very delightful to the eye. Her thick, black hair was now doubled up in two pigtails, and nearly covered with a black bow about which she was at the same time extremely proud, and very uneasy, fearing remarks about it. Her skirts, she said, were much too long for a girl of her age, for "she was beginning to grow up," and she wanted stockings with silk all the way up, instead of those deceitful ones that turned into lisle thread in the middle of the calf. But when her grandmother told her that her birthday present for her was to be two new frocks, the maiden replied with disdain that she wished Grandmamma had sent her the money when she was with Madame de Kergouël so that she might have laid it out in Paris, on her way home. "I couldn't possibly go back in the autumn with English clothes, you know," she explained loftily. She, too, was going through the less pleasant stages of *développement* incidental to that much belauded milestone where childhood ends and womanhood begins, and now it was young Jimmy who disapproved of the airs and graces that in himself had caused such trouble. He insisted on calling her "the kid," and teased her

inordinately over the slight French accent that was one of her new belongings.

However, under the influence of Aghassy's unbroken system of pleasant non-interference, the times were good, and as the youngsters got used to each other they settled down to their old terms of affectionate comradeship, and spent long hours together explaining to each other their newly acquired views on life, and such trifles.

Picotee, whose devotion to Aghassy had never faltered, made herself rather a nuisance, at first, by pursuing him into the fastness of his music-room, and trying to lure him out of that sanctuary; but presently it became known that his unusual absorption in his work meant that he had decided to go to America for a six-weeks' tour in October, and she left him in peace.

Lady Mary's relief at this news about America was immense, and Thorn absolutely changed colour with satisfaction when the old lady told him; but the two exchanged no very vital remarks about it.

Lady Mary found it the better part of valour to say as little as possible about Aghassy to her nephew. Charles was perfectly polite to Aghassy, and did his best to meet that strategist half-way in his pleasant advances; but Thorn's best in this matter was a sorry one, and of late he had avoided his cousin's husband more carefully than ever, and Lady Mary, though they had never discussed the matter, knew from Bruno why this was. Charles had been told the story of the little dog. Apparently he had heard something vague about it from one of the servants, and had questioned Bruno, who told him the whole thing.

"The Signor Thorn was very angry, Eccellenza," the old man said. "He, too, is terrible when he is angry." After which he added with an irrepressible smile: "With respect speaking, I could not tell Your Excellency what it was he said. It was worse than anything *I* ever said—but I agreed with every word of it."

The weeks passed by, and when the first of October arrived, wet, and bedraggled, and muddy, Aghassy had never made the slightest reference direct or indirect to the unfortunate mother of Theodore, the gift of God, or to the circumstances of Martin's deposition and Charles's return to power. His manner had changed in no way since the pre-Cuthbertson days; nearly every evening he played for an hour in the drawing-room; he was pleasant to everyone without being too pleasant, which is always a sign of strength; and the only changes in his mode of life were amply explained by the fact of his great pre-occupation with his musical studies in view of his tour in America.

II

Picotee had been taken over to Paris, and placed in the hands of Madame Lambert, by her devoted stepfather, only a few days before, and the house seemed very quiet without her voice and loud, cheerful footsteps, for she was not, like Jim, of the soft-footed half of humanity.

During Aghassy's absence the question had chanced to come up of a studio for Jim. There were plenty of rooms in the house that would do, and never be missed, and the boy was fired with enthusiasm and delight by

the idea. Lady Mary, who was a firm believer in the advisability of taking the bull by the horns immediately on entering the arena, hardly gave Aghassy time to eat his soup, the evening of his return, before grabbing him, so to speak, and trying her strength. The result was that she felt very much like what a man might have felt on having literally seized a bull in this high-handed style, expecting mighty resistance, and finding the bull melt to the ground in his hands, with a pleasant smile. It appeared that Aghassy thought that nothing could be better than for either of the rooms mentioned to be prepared as she suggested! Lady Mary's relief expressed itself in a gush of friendliness towards the man about whom her feelings were so mixed, although it was in fact neither his house, nor his wife's, but her own; so, although there was nothing on earth to prevent her having the room arranged as a bear-pit if she wanted to, she thanked him gratefully for his agreement, adding: "I will have the room painted and arranged just as he likes it for his birthday. You will like that, won't you, Jinks?" And then, after a second, struck by something in Aghassy's face, her heart sank. He had smiled, but she had seen something strange, if not a little sinister, in his smile, and there was also in it a momentary but decided look of triumph. Bruno, as well, she observed, had noticed this quality; but neither Thorn nor Lily seemed to be feeling anything but relief at Aghassy's manner, and young Jim's eager-voiced plans for his studio covered the pause and went on pleasantly throughout the meal.

Lady Mary asked Thorn next day if he had not

been surprised by Aghassy's agreeing so pleasantly to the plan.

"No," said Thorn; adding abruptly: "He could not surprise me. Unless he tried *not* being surprising, for a change! Thank God he's going away." His face lowered as it always did at the mention of his pupil's stepfather, and Lady Mary hastily changed the subject, because she dreaded, with a ridiculous and incomprehensible dread, his mentioning the matter of the little dog.

One of Aghassy's few tactical mistakes had been to bring home, one afternoon a few weeks after the episode, a well-bred little Irish terrier, which he gave, in an off-hand way before both the children, to Bruno. Picotee, who was as sharp as a razor, had noticed something strange in the old butler's manner, and mentioned it to her grandmother. "Very kind of Jacques to give Bruno such a lovely little dog!" she said. "He's an ungrateful old man, Bruno. I don't like Italians; I prefer the French."

"What did Bruno say?" Lady Mary asked, plying her needle industriously.

The child shrugged her large shoulders in close imitation of some pliable little Frenchwoman. "Oh, I don't know. He was perfectly polite. He said 'thank you,' and so on; but he looked——" She broke off. "I don't quite know *how* he looked, but anyhow, he wasn't like someone who had just had a present! I suppose," she added after a minute, "he was angry because poor Jacques killed that horrid Risotto. As if Jacques could help it!"

"Oh," said Lady Mary, looking up, "so Jacques killed his little dog?"

"Why, Grandmamma, didn't you know? Yes, ages ago, before I came home. Jim told me."

Lady Mary thought, when left alone, that the house seemed in a way to be haunted by the poor little, misshapen, vulgar, yellow dog, so many people seemed to be thinking about the creature; and yet, somehow, only Picotee had mentioned it to her. She did not know indeed whether Lily had ever heard either the true version or the false one of the story.

III

And now the child had gone back to school; Aghassy was motoring down to Southampton on his way to America the next day but one; and Lady Mary sat alone by the fire, late in the afternoon, thinking about all these things and trying to be as happy and as much at ease as she felt she ought to be. The "maggot" had gone; Jim once more the old Jim, he was to have the studio; and for two months Aghassy would be away and the other four left to themselves, and their own innocent, peaceful devices. Presently Lily came in with a large package of patterns of chintzes for the new room. Its young lord wanted birds, and there was one beautiful one of parrots, and another whereon caracoled in dreadfully acrobatic attitudes a fine family of peacocks. Lady Mary preferred the peacocks, but Mrs. Aghassy feared that the austere-minded young artist would find them a little flamboyant.

"I met Arthur Hesketh," she went on, holding up

a chintz and looking at it with her head on one side. "I met him in Regent Street, and he had just seen Jacques. Jacques has been buying good-bye presents for everybody. Isn't he kind, really, Mamma, after all?" she added with ingenuous eagerness.

Lady Mary always felt a brute in pinning her daughter-in-law down in any way, but she could not resist this opening.

"His presents are always delightful," she conceded; adding, thus turning her speech into a scorpion: "But why do you say 'after all,' Lily?"

Mrs. Aghassy rose and busied herself with the fire, struggling to put on a very big piece of ship-wood. She did not know quite what to answer, it was plain, so she said nothing, which is a more efficacious manner of avoiding a question than ordinary, articulate people believe, and after a moment she came back and went on with her little budget of news. "Arthur Hesketh is going to motor down to Southampton with Jacques on Wednesday," she said. "Jacques asked him because he thought he looked tired, and they're going to take Jim."

Lady Mary nodded. "That's a good plan. It's a beautiful run and will do the boy good. Also, it will give you a little rest about that precious studio of his—the impatient young monkey! Arthur has not seen him for some time," she went on. "I am sure he will think he's looking very much better."

And then Jim came in from a walk with Thorn, and swept away both chintzes with magnificent disdain—no chintzes for him. "It is going to be a studio and

not a boudoir," he declared in a very masculine manner. He would have a few rush-bottomed chairs, and, if his mother insisted on a Chesterfield, as he knew she would, there was only one kind he would deign to accept, and that was a green leather one.

Early on Wednesday morning the traveller set out. He came with his wife into Lady Mary's room to say good-bye to her, very deferentially kissing her hand and smiling. "I shall be back in two months," he said, "and hope to find you as happy as you look this morning. Here is a little present that I found the other day and thought you might like. Don't open it till I have gone."

She did not want his presents, the poor baffled old woman; but she knew his love for little surprise gifts, and though she would have liked to strangle him with regard to other things, she had not the heart to hurt him about this queer little fad of his. So she took the little shagreen box and thanked him as gratefully as she could. "Tell Arthur Hesketh to come back with Jim," she said, as Aghassy reached the door. "I want to ask him what he thinks of the boy, and I haven't seen him for months."

Aghassy turned, one hand on his wife's shoulder. "He's an extremely busy man, of course," was all he said. Then Jimmy appeared in a long woolly brown coat, and a long woolly white muffler, squeezing his fingers into a new pair of gloves, to kiss his grandmother good-bye. He was clearly looking forward to the long drive, and Lady Mary for some reason was moved to send a message to Doctor Hesketh by him as well.

The boy nodded. "I will tell him, Grandmother. We are stopping at Harley Street, you know, to pick him up. I will try to make him come back to dinner, shall I?" and he was gone.

Lady Mary rose and, the day being sunny, though cold, had herself wheeled out into the glass gallery, which was heated by pipes, and Lily joining her, they settled down for a comfortable morning at needlework. It was very pleasant sitting there, and the sun cast a cheerful little glow through the glass on the Italian bricks of the rug-covered floor, giving a delusion of solar warmth.

"They'll have a delightful ride down," Lily said after a while. "Dear old Jinks! He *was* pleased. It was kind of Jacques to ask Arthur! He's looking very fagged and tired, and I am glad he could get the day off."

Lady Mary nodded. Her heart was high as the time passed and she knew that the car was carrying her enemy rapidly farther away. She liked to think of him hurrying along towards the steamer; she liked to think of him on the steamer, surrounded by deep water, heading for New York; and she was not guiltless of a wicked gleam of satisfaction as she reflected that he was not a particularly good sailor.

Lily was busy delicately darning her own and the old lady's silk stockings. This difficult work she did with skill and delicacy, and was innocently proud of the invisibility of her darns. Towards half-past eleven she was leaning over in her chair, a web-like silver-grey stocking drawn over her arm as she pointed out to

Lady Mary with what difficulty one could see where the holes had been. "You would hardly guess there had been an awful one just there," she said, pointing with her needle, "would you?"

At that minute the door opened and Bruno came out, his face very anxious. "Eccellenza," he said, "something has happened—it's very strange——"

Lady Mary, always very fierce when frightened, asked him sharply what the matter was. The old man drew a deep breath.

"It's Sir Arthur Hesketh," he said, "on the telephone. He wants to know if he can come to lunch to-day, as he will be in the neighbourhood, and— isn't very busy."

Lily looked round. "Arthur Hesketh!" she said, puzzled but not alarmed.

Lady Mary was silent for a moment. Then she said quietly. "Say yes, Bruno. Mrs. Aghassy and I shall be delighted."

The old man threw a distressed glance at her, and withdrew. A moment later he returned, this time with a telegram sent from some village in Hampshire. The telegram was addressed to Lady Mary, and it said: "I am taking Jimmy with me to America. Greetings. Jacques."

IV

"DEAREST MOTHER,

"Isn't it ripping? I am going with Jacques. He never told me a word, and he went and bought me a beautiful steamer trunk, and a dressing-case, and had Hemming make me two new suits of clothes; and I've

got a ripping steamer-rug, and a big leather cushion. You never saw such a lot of things in your life! I am so excited I don't know how to hold it in, and I've only a few minutes to write. The steamer is splendid, and we've got a big deck-cabin and we're going to sit at the Captain's table. And it all seems like a dream. I can hardly believe it. Jacques is a corker! Even when we did not go to Harley Street I didn't suspect anything, because he told me he had had a telephone message from Doctor Hesketh just before leaving the house, saying he could not come—said he hadn't mentioned it to you because he knew you would fuss about my health, catching cold or something; and when we got on board he took me into the cabin and showed me the trunk and dressing-case, all with 'J.G.D.' painted on, and told me. It's exactly like a fairy-tale. There never was anybody in the world so kind as Jacques. I do hope he's right in thinking you won't mind, though! He's wired, he says, and now he's writing on the other side of this table. Everybody's awfully polite to him, and all the passengers point him out to each other—damn the blot!—he's an awful swell and no mistake. Won't Picotee be sold? She was so frightfully grand about Paris, but she's never been to America.

"Love to you and Gran. We're going to cable when we land. Don't worry about me. I'll do everything Jacques says and take great care of my health.

"Your loving JINKS.

"I nearly forgot Charles. Please give him my love. Jacques says that my journey is for my seventeenth birthday."

CHAPTER XIII

I

THE following Sunday morning, which was the fifth of October, Lady Mary Dampierre's butler went to Confession in the little church down the hill. It was a very inclement day; a punishing wind swept the streets, and rain oozed at intervals out of bulging low clouds. The old man, his umbrella held close over his head, his coat-collar turned up, plodded along deep in thought that was plainly of a painful nature. His face, under its decent bowler, looked thinner and older than it had done three or four days before; and his eyes were dulled, as the eyes of monkeys are by illness or grief. It was only half-past seven, and the autumn dawn had been dilatory, and as he crossed the little square the people in the converging lines of worshippers looked to his weary eyes, all sad and old, and alien like himself. Wild horses could not have torn him from the service of his old mistress, and yet there were days—and this was one of them—when he longed with an actual pain for Italy, with its sun, and its friendly skies, and the beauty of its architecture. If he had been in Italy he could have heard Mass that morning, say in Florence, at one of a score of beautiful, romantic, historically rich old churches; and this was an ugly, badly constructed, cheaply built church of the worst period of the last century.

Checking his thoughts as irreverent and ungrateful.

the old servant went and knelt in his accustomed corner. It was necessary that morning for him to confess, although he could not stay for Mass, for his mental sins had been many and grave of late, and their weight was more than he could bear. So he said his prayers before Confession in the cold, desolate little sanctuary, glad to see that only one person would be before him in the confessional, a small hunch-backed Latin of some kind, whose head rolled grotesquely on his shoulders as he prayed.

The earliest Mass was nearing its end, and newcomers for the second one were filling the vacant seats; a haggard light filled the grimy windows; the feeble, bleating voice of the priest reading Mass echoed oddly in the half-empty church. Bruno closed his eyes to shut out distracting thoughts and prayed very hard, for he had much to set in order before his turn came in the confessional. The opening of the door startled him in his prayers, and he looked up. A woman was just coming out, a handkerchief dabbing her eyes, her face distorted with crying, like a child's. As the old hunch-back took her place, Bruno found himself watching this woman as she sat down and bent over her beads. He had seen her before, but he could not remember where, and her presence disturbed him oddly. This was another sin for him to confess when his turn at last came.

It was dark and stuffy in the confessional; it struck him that it smelt of bad consciences; of sins. . . . When he came out a few minutes later, unweighted and solaced, as if he had left a tangible load in the little pen with the curtain, he turned back towards the

door and went into a little side-chapel, where there was an iron stand ablaze with votive candles. These candles cost one penny, or twopence, or three-pence apiece, according to the size, and, taking the money from his shabby little purse, the old servant with much care chose three of the largest. With great delicacy he impaled each one on a little spike and set them ablaze. Then he went into the little chapel, which was dedicated to Our Lady of the Seven Dolours, and again knelt down. One candle he dedicated to his only living relation, an old sister of his who lived in Siena; one to Lily Aghassy, whom in his prayers he called the Signorina; and one to Lady Mary; and for each of these three people in turn he prayed hard for several minutes to the Queen of the Heaven, who once upon a time had been a simple carpenter's wife in Asia Minor. As he rose he found himself face to face with the tall woman whom he had seen coming out of the confessional, and to his surprise she was plainly waiting for him. She was no longer crying, but her large, handsome face looked a little blurred and damp, and her lips were not quite steady as she spoke to him.

"Surely," she said, "you are the gentleman who opened the door to me that day at Lady Mary Dampierre's——"

Bruno answered in the same undertone: "I am the butler."

"Are you staying to Communion?" she said.

He shook his head. "No, I haven't time this morning. I'm coming to-morrow." As he spoke he dipped his hand in the holy water and held it out

to her. She touched it and crossed herself, and they went out into the rain together.

"I'm Mrs. Cuthbertson," the woman said. "Do you remember? It's quite a long time ago——"

Bruno did remember, and, what was more, he had always felt that Mrs. Cuthbertson's call had somehow opened an epoch of unexpected drama at Yellowleaf. He gazed at her for a moment, and then said:

"Yes, I remember," and opened his umbrella. She was evidently in distress and in a highly nervous condition, for she was wringing her hands and twisting her fingers in a way that must have *hurt* them. "Will you let me walk with you a little way?" she said. "I don't want to do anybody any harm, I'm sure, but I want to *know*——"

"Perhaps," Bruno answered, "you'd better carry the umbrella, you being so much larger than me——"

They walked on together through the thickening rain. After a moment the woman broke out, speaking quickly and deprecatingly.

"I've only seen him twice since that day," she said. "He was dreadfully angry. My word! I've never seen him so angry before."

She shuddered, and Bruno knew.

"You mean Mr. Aghassy?" he asked.

"Yes. The old lady told him I'd been, and he came to see me that night. I—oh!—I thought he was going to kill me, but he didn't; and I'm sure I didn't do any harm."

Bruno, who grasped pretty well what it was, looked at her pityingly. "Poveretta!" he murmured with

compassion. It was on his way home from seeing her that Aghassy had murdered the poor little dog.

"And he's only been once since, and that was when Theodore was ill. That was in July."

There was a pause, and then the old man, who very delicately did not wish to ask any questions, suggested gently that she might perhaps tell him what he could do for her. They had reached the top of the hill, where someone had built a covered way from his house to the curb, and, under this shelter, they came to a standstill.

"I want to know where he is," the woman said. "You see, it's like this. There's a gentleman—a commission-agent he is—that wants me to marry him. He's fond of Theodore—that's my little boy—and doesn't blame me about—you know—and I shouldn't mind marrying him, for I'm pretty lonely and it makes me feel younger to have him round, but——" she broke off.

"I should think so," the old man said in a very kind voice, "that would be a good plan, and you can't—" he hesitated—"be innamorata of Meester Aghassy any more."

Mrs. Cuthbertson gave a sudden, harsh laugh. "Fond of him! I should think not. Suit my book best never to set eyes on him again; but I don't believe he'll *let* me marry Mr. Piper!"

This subtlety would have defeated most Anglo-Saxons, but to the Latin Bruno it was a trifle. "Excuse my asking you," he said quietly, "but either it is that he cares still for you—and a man might," he added with dignified approval, glancing up at her as she

stood, her handsome face haloed by the drooping umbrella, "or it's jealousy without love."

The woman nodded. "Yes, that's it. He doesn't love me, but he's that spiteful that he can't bear to let me go."

And then Bruno had his great idea. Explaining that Mr. Aghassy was now on the high seas, to be gone for two months, he invited himself to go and see Mrs. Cuthbertson that evening, which happened to be his Sunday evening out. And on her agreeing that this would be a very satisfactory move, he wrote her address down on his little old pocket-book and, hailing her bus for her, helped her politely to mount its muddy step and took off his hat with a fine, sweeping gesture. As he went on home he thought that the Fates had been good to him that morning, that through this chance meeting he had found the end of a very valuable clue; that through this woman he could learn all about Aghassy, for she was a simple, uncultivated creature, whom he with his supple Southern mind could turn inside-out like a glove, and knowledge about Aghassy, no matter how come by, must, he felt sure, be of use to Lady Mary. But as he went up the damp garden-path he suddenly stood still with dismay. Doctor Hesketh had told him yesterday that Lady Mary's fainting-fit a few days before, on the arrival of Aghassy's telegram, was no ordinary fainting-fit, but a very alarming attack of heart-failure. The old lady was to be on no account upset or distressed about anything, and even now she would not be getting up, for she had not been out of her bed since that morning when the news came.

It could not, then, be to her that he could tell his discoveries about Aghassy. A few minutes later he found Thorn in the dining-room in his dressing-gown, making himself a cup of coffee and glancing through the paper.

Thorn looked ill and distressed, and, in answer to the old man's question, told him that Lady Mary had not had a good night; Drake had just told him that the nurse had told her that the old lady's illness would probably be a long and serious one.

"Signor Carlo," Bruno burst out, leaning across the table with the fumes of coffee rising between him and the other man, "It is an evil soul, Meester Aghassy's, and I wish him an apoplexy and a sudden death."

Thorn nodded wearily. He was too exhausted mentally and physically after the strain of the last few days for any outward vehemence; but his mouth stretched and flattened in a grim way that Bruno understood, and the old man knew that they were in sympathy with each other. He was about to say something tentative on the subject of Mrs. Cuthbertson, when Drake came in and asked for a cup of coffee for her mistress. "I'm just making it, Drake. I will bring her ladyship a cup myself." And the woman, after a sharp glance at each of them, withdrew quietly on her large flat feet.

II

It was nearly twelve that night when Bruno quietly opened the front door and crept upstairs to his room. It was many years since he had been out so late, and,

filled as his mind was with the things he had learned from Mrs. Cuthbertson, the quiet, grey, rain-swept streets, lined with sleeping houses behind high walls, had been almost frightening to him. He was glad to get back into the comfortable little room where he had lived for forty years, every object in which seemed to look at him now with friendly eyes. His fire was still burning, and, coaxing it into a blaze, he put on his dressing-gown—a once gorgeous garment that had belonged in its youth to his dear Captain Jim, and settled down in the armchair. This old chair dated even farther back, for it had belonged to Lord Hainault, and, before him, to his father, and it was grateful to the old man's back as he started on his difficult task of untangling and righting the confusion of his thoughts.

He was so tired, and so old, that quite naturally his mind swung back over more than half a century to the time when, as a very young footman in the house of Prince Bevilacqua in Siena, he had first seen Captain and Lady Mary Dampierre, then on their honeymoon travels. He remembered that first evening when she came into the dining-room in all her panoply, leaning on the old prince's arm. She was dressed in white that billowed and floated round her, covering an immense amount of floor space, though it was gathered into an almost incredibly slim waist. Her smoothly parted hair, of a delightful bright brown, covered her ears in two satin-like wings, and her eyes, notably dark and lustrous even in Italy, were fuller of light than any the young servant had ever seen. She was beautiful, she was fascinating, with the innocent unconscious

charm that she could not help any more than a lark can help its song; and the old prince and old princess, and Don Gianluca and Donna Paolina, and the rest, even His Excellency the Cardinal, were obviously under her spell. Bruno wondered a little at the brightness of the vision he had called up after all those years; he could see it all so clearly: the huge vaulted dining-room with the ancient pictures on the walls, the immense table sparkling in the light of dozens of candles, the very faces of the people seated round the table, were as distinct to him as if painted on his wall above the mantelpiece.

It had been in summer, and the windows were open, and the light from the many branched sconces was blown up across the shadows of the deep roof, and the smell of magnolias came in at the windows. He had not been quite twenty at the time, but he could smell those magnolias still——

The English capitano, who so strangely, as it seemed to the army of servants in the immense old palace, was only a plain "Mr.," although his wife was a "Lady," stayed in Siena for a fortnight, and during that time the world was a gay and jocund place, full of laughter, and song, and delight. It was a welcome change to the young people in the house, for the old prince and princess were home-bound, quiet people, living in splendid retirement, and leaving the palace very rarely except for their solemn daily drive together in the hermetically sealed brougham, in the gardens of the fortress. Their sons, who in the Italian fashion lived with their families in apartments under

the same roof, were dull people, too, Don Gianluca being immersed in the compilation of the history of the family and its fifteenth-century glories; and the wife of the other son, Don Arrigo, was an invalid; so that they could give the pomp-and-circumstance-loving Bruno but meagre imaginative diet. And now these English people had changed everything, or rather the milady had, for her husband, a handsome, rather stupid young man, did little more than follow her about and carry out her wishes in a state of abject devotion.

When the young couple left, having distributed largess with a generosity that took away the breath of everyone from the house-steward to the smallest scullion, the house once more became quiet and dull, the flowers in the vast old garden seemed to lose their sweetness and the very sun his lustre. . . .

Outside Yellowleaf the cold autumn rain pelted down and the wind was rising. . . .

When the old prince died about a year later, Bruno, now second footman, decided to seek adventure in Rome; and here it was, two or three years after his move, that he again met Lady Mary and her consort. Bruno was then floor-waiter in the newest and finest of Roman hotels, and the gods, those fine old pagans, in whom he instinctively and innocently believed, with no detriment whatever to his faith in the Christian Deity, arranged that suite fifteen, that finest and sunniest of apartments looking out on the beautiful square with the fountain, should be allotted to his special care. Then Pallas Athene, the grey-eyed, disguising herself, no doubt, as Mr. Schwarz, Captain

Dampierre's courier, took Lady Mary Dampierre by the hand and led her to suite fifteen, where Bruno all unconsciously was waiting to devote the whole of his long, faithful life to her.

III

When they came back to England in the spring, they went to Captain Dampierre's house in Cheshire, and then to London, to Lord Hainault's house in Grosvenor Square. Bruno remembered his horror as he got out of the cab and beheld the desolating similarity of the row of great houses before him. His eyes were used to the beautiful palaces of his own country, and could it be that his liege lady, his lovely and miraculous mistress, could live in a barrack so hideous, and what was worse so undistinguished? But once behind the big, brown front-door his mood changed to one of amazed admiration, for here was a wonderful interior. Where were the stone staircase, the long stone corridors, the vaulted, dusty ceilings to whose dark recesses only spiders and flies could penetrate? Where were the brick floors requiring oiling and polishing? Here everything was padded, wadded, the carpets which covered every inch of the floor were thick and soft and sound-killing, the walls were covered with dark, rich, begilded papers, the sofas and chairs were stuffed almost to bursting with feathers. Everything shone, and the satin in the big drawing-room was new, and of an incredible gloss, and Bruno had never in his life before seen new satin. In his wildest dreams of splendour befitting Lady Mary he had never

imagined anything like this. It was like living in a huge padded jewel-case, and in a little while the young man began to grow fat. There was so much food, and meals occurred so often! It was bewildering, but he was very happy, for he was Lady Mary's footman, and her knowledge of his beautiful language, in which she always spoke to him, created a special little standing for him in the house.

Captain Dampierre, looked back at, seemed of no great importance. Bruno had always been convinced that he was not nearly good enough for Lady Mary, and, when he died, less than ten years after the marriage, he left no great gap. Of course, by that time there was Master Jimmy. Bruno remembered the day of the funeral down in Cheshire, where they had taken the poor young man to be buried. Master Jimmy, about eighteen months old, was playing on the floor with a feather he had pulled out of a feather brush, as the slow steps of the bearers carrying the coffin passed the nursery door, where Bruno had been told to stay; and then, as the funeral procession left the door on foot—for they had only to cross the corner of the little park to reach the church—Bruno held the child in his arms at the window. He still had the feather in his little hand and, as his father's coffin passed by, he pointed with it and stammered out: "Black peoples! Black peoples!" . . .

Everyone had expected Lady Mary to marry again, and Bruno was sure that several of the gentlemen who came so often to tea, in the barbarous English fashion, at Grosvenor Square, had asked her to marry

them, but he knew that she had never in the remotest way contemplated such a thing. Her poor young husband's death had not broken her heart, and she made no pretence of a despair she did not feel; but, as time went on, and her sincere gentle grief died away, she went her way quietly and happily, quite content with the little boy, and her few friends, and her many social duties. Bruno also knew what few other people did—that the young widow was a voracious and discriminating reader of books. She loved books more like a man than a woman, and during Lord Hainault's long absences in his yacht she used his library, the little one, as her own, often sitting there, as her young footman knew, till the small hours, deep in books that her rosy-faced, good-natured brother had never even opened. . . .

As he reached this point in his memories, the old man leaned over and put more coals on the fire, for he was a long way from his goal yet, and he was getting to a time in his life the memory of which always hurt him with a fresh pang.

It was while Jimmy, now become Master Jim, was cramming for Sandhurst that It happened. Bruno had always felt that things might have been more bearable if It had taken place in the country. There was something horribly public, and unseemly, and crude, in the fact that it was in Rotten Row that Lady Mary had been thrown from her horse and turned from one hour to the next from an active, beautiful-bodied, strong woman in the prime of life, into a broken invalid never again to set foot to the ground. Bruno, already promoted butler, had himself opened the door to the terrified groom who had been sent on by Lord Hainault

to prepare the household for the dreadful home-coming. Even now he could remember her face as they bore her in, one of her long braids of bright hair hanging to the floor as they carried her upstairs.

It was after this that they made the move to Yellowleaf. Sands, Lord Hainault's valet, it was, who had told Bruno the history of the old house far away in the impossible and rather improper suburb of St. John's Wood. Yellowleaf had been built far away in early Georgian days by the seventh Lord Hainault, for a lady about whom, it appeared, least said, soonest mended; but on this lady's death the house reverted to the family, and, in a moment of tight finances—for the Hainaults had achieved their great wealth in George the Fourth's day, and before that were comparatively poor—a younger son had been given the house for himself and his numerous family, who were difficult to dispose of, and, after that, so comfortable was it, so rural and full of fresh air, that the subsequent younger sons regarded it as the very topmost plume in their caps. Several times it had been added to, and improved upon, but at the time of Lady Mary's accident, there being no younger sons, and her brother—owing to one of those delightful, blighted disappointments in love, so universal at that time, according to novelists of the period—never having married, Yellowleaf had been closed for years.

Bruno distinctly remembered how poor Hainault had broken down after his first talk with his sister subsequent to the doctor's having told her, in obedience to her coldly peremptory orders, that she would never walk again.

"Bruno, Bruno," Lord Hainault had said, frankly crying before a man from a country where masculine tears are no disgrace, "they've told her! She knows. My God! and she's only thirty-nine!"

The tears were rolling down Bruno's cheeks, for he was no less afflicted than Lady Mary's brother, and presently Lord Hainault, after a loud, conclusive blow of his nose, told him about Yellowleaf.

"She wants to go and live at Yellowleaf," he said brokenly. "It's a place we've got up in an awful part of London called St. John's Wood. Why, damn it all, it's barely respectable!"

After a minute he went on: "She refuses absolutely to stay here, and she'd die in the country. Oh, my poor girl! She couldn't stand it. But imagine," the mid-Victorian added, in honest bewilderment, "imagine preferring St. John's Wood to Grosvenor Square!" . . .

And then came the preparation of the old house for the young invalid. Mrs. Beeney, Lord Hainault's housekeeper, took Bruno with her on her first journey to the inaccessible dower-house in the ill-credited suburb. The old man remembered his struggles with the key in the rusty lock, and the damp musty smell as they went in. Conscientiously they went all over the house, from attic to cellar, and during the middle of the afternoon Lord Hainault joined them. He had never been in the house before, and wondered at its comfort and dim beauty.

"I will make it beautiful for her," he said.
"Beautiful——"

IV

That was nearly forty years ago, and the following spring Lady Mary, who had never been in St. John's Wood before in her life, was lifted out of her brother's most roomy and comfortable carriage, and put into the first of a succession of always improved wheel-chairs. It was the first time she had been out of the house since the accident, not because she might not have had drives before, but because she refused to budge until Yellowleaf was ready for her. Waving her nurse aside, she beckoned to Bruno. "You will always wheel me about, Bruno," she said in Italian. "You might as well begin now." And thus it was that the young Italian entered into his undefined and very important duties in the new scheme of things. . . .

It was after this that through a series of legacies Lady Mary, whose husband had been a poor man, and whose own dowry had been comparatively small, became the rich woman she was. Captain Jim grew up, although in that markedly unfashionable part of the town, used to every luxury, finding no expense too great for the fulfilment of his wishes. But he was not spoilt, and at five-and-twenty was a most charming, simple young man, and one of the most popular youths in the Hussars.

Even in those days Yellowleaf had been full of pleasant, spacious silence, for Lady Mary had never had many friends, and as time went on her acquaintances one by one, no doubt chiefly as the result of her own attitude, gave up coming to the house. After all, St. John's Wood was in those days very, very far

from the haunts of London society, and coachmen looked askance when told to drive there, rather as though they thought something in the air might upset their horses' healths, or their own morals. . . .

Bruno's one consolation during the last four days, while Lady Mary was so ill, and the great Sir Arthur Hesketh so very grave in his manner, had been the number of calls and cards evoked by the news of her dangerous condition. Miserable though he was, it had comforted and gratified the old man to open the door many times a day to inquirers, a great many of whom bore titles that he considered worthy of decorating the big oak-chest in the hall—a duchess, a countess, two viscountesses and innumerable mere "Ladies," had come personally to the door, and the duchess, whom Bruno had always cherished in his heart as a proper associate for his lady, and who was one of the few friends of the old times who still came occasionally to see her, even brought a great bunch of hot-house roses, which was gratifying to Bruno, even though Lady Mary never saw them.

Secretly, in his loyal breast, he had always regretted this seclusion in which his mistress chose to live; the short time between Captain Dampierre's marriage and his death had been a rosy one for the old man, for then there had been parties, and dances, and constant going out at night behind the splendid horses that Lady Mary always kept, though she never used them herself. It had looked—for the handsome young couple were enjoying the few years they were allotted to be together—as if the old glories of Grosvenor

Square might be coming back, and then . . . As he reached this point in his reflections the old man rose with a lavish gesture of hopelessness, and prepared for bed. Captain Jim had died, and Yellowleaf shrunk back still further into its seclusion and silence; and now, here was Master Jimmy, the Signorino, almost grown up, and the poor Signorina Lili had married *questa bestia*. . . . Bruno had learned many things that evening, sad and alarming things that roused his deepest anger and hatred. For a long time he lay in his bed watching the dying fire as the wind fretted its life away, for his was a great responsibility and he did not know how he ought to use it; but by the time he dropped off to sleep he had almost made up his mind by a process of eliminations. What he had to tell might kill the Signorina Lili with pain, and it might kill Her Excellency by the rage that it would rouse in her faint old heart. Remained then only one person, and to him the poor old messenger must repair the next day. He must tell Charles Thorn.

CHAPTER XIV

I

ONE morning early in April Charles Thorn was sitting reading in his comfortable upstairs study. Through the two big windows a well-meaning, but rather feeble, sun was creeping gently. The room was very delightful, being full of the gradual accumulations of a rich, travelled, and scholarly man. Books lined two sides of it. There were one or two fine pictures, a Conder, a Corot, a very beautiful bust of a boy by Lorenzo da Credi—a smiling brown face under a brown leather cap, and a bronze green jerkin through slits in which fluted linen showed. Over the mantelpiece was a fine old bust of Socrates, and a very good modern reproduction of the head of Pericles in the British Museum. Between the windows hung a case of splendid old fans, the fruit of a collection begun by Thorn's grandfather and to which he, rarely, but always with great discrimination, contributed. The old oak floor was partly covered by Persian rugs, and there was a glass-fronted cabinet full of delicate Venetian glass, that looked, as the best Venetian glass always does, as if it was the off-spring of sea-foam and moon-shine. So far as furniture goes the room was rather empty, for its unsociable owner rarely had a visitor, and, as he belonged to the prowling type of man, he required room for untrammelled movement. In one corner there was a low divan, over which was stretched a beautiful old Seistan rug, . . . a pleasant room,

mildly characteristic of its owner, though in no way over-personal, and Thorn, seated in an armchair by the window, his long legs stretched over the floor, big round horn spectacles on his nose, looked exactly what the gods had meant him to be—a well-bred, rather dull Englishman, saved from mediocrity by the strength of his tastes rather than that of his brain. He might have fought with Sir John Hawkewood in the roaring fifteenth century—shabby dented armour would have suited that big frame of his; with his length of arm and his cool eye he should have made a fine swordsman; but after all, his well-cut, well-worn grey tweed clothes, and the fountain-pen on the table beside him, seemed to suit him as well as the more romantic accoutrements. He was reading Castiglione's "Courtier," a very old Italian edition, and his mind was so thoroughly soaked in the period of that noble old book that, when the door opened quietly and Mrs. Aghassy came in with one of her hands held behind her back, he did not hear her, and raised his eyes a few seconds later only because the door she had not closed let in a current of cool air that touched his thinly-clad ankles.

"Lily!"

She laughed gaily. "You look as if I were a ghost. Mamma is in the glass gallery, Charles, and wants you, but I am the bearer of a rich gift. Guess what I've got in my hand!"

She looked very well, very happy, and there was a faint flush in her delicate cheeks as she spoke. As he gazed at her he was glad to see how young, how

florescent she looked, but could not help wondering how she could be so content and full of child-like mirth, after the news of yesterday.

"Well, guess!" she insisted. She wore a little blue frock that hung in straight, graceful folds to her grey silk ankles and grey suède feet; her pretty hair, hair so bright and vital-looking that it made most other heads look shaggy and neglected, was piled high on her head, and ridiculous little cork-screw curls, transparent and fluffy, hung round her temples and ears.

Seeing his glance, she laughed and her colour deepened.

"I've just washed my hair," she said.

"Lucrezia Borgia's excuse," he returned, closing his book carefully over a thin tortoise-shell paper-cutter and putting it on the table. "When she wanted to be alone she always washed her hair."

Lily stared at him, for she knew nothing and cared nothing for this fascinating lady. "Well, if you won't guess what I have I shall have to show you. Look!"

What she held up to him in her ridiculous scrap of a hand were two primroses in a little cup of crumpled, furry-looking leaves. Thorn smiled, his grim face, which had always seemed to Lily, who knew him well, to be more a denial than a betrayal of his real self, softened wonderfully. He was passionately fond of flowers, and particularly of the little shy ones dropped from the departing skirts of winter like little lost jewels. On his writing-table stood a silver lustre bowl, a fine, open, friendly bowl, that was always full of flowers. It was now full of violets, but

they were violets that he had bought, violets that had travelled from the south of France, and their day was nearly done. Taking the little nosegay Lily offered him, he made a little hole in the middle of these violets, and worked it down amongst them till their stems touched the water.

"Thank you, Lily," he said. "That was kind of you. Come along! Shall we go down."

And they left the room, and went slowly down the shallow dark staircase.

"Have you written to Jacques yet?" he asked, as they reached the first landing.

She, who was ahead of him, stopped and answered without turning: "No, what is the good?" Her voice had changed, and her little shoulders seemed to droop as if with a strongly remembered grief. "It was an awful shock and a disappointment," she said in a very low voice. "But after all, Jiminy is seventeen and a half, and it won't hurt him to see some more of America. Jacques will take very good care of him, you know," she added, beginning again her slow progress down the staircase. "He's very fond of him."

"Yes!" Thorn heard himself say.

"Jim will love all the travel, Charles," she went on with an odd insistence in her voice, although this was, as a matter of fact, the first time he and she had discussed this entirely unexpected postponement of Aghassy's and Jim's return to England. They had reached the ground-floor before Charles Thorn spoke, and then, although his mind was full of forebodings, he had not the heart to try to impress them on her.

“I am glad,” he said gently, “that Aunt Mary has such a fine day——”

II

Lady Mary had been established by Bruno in the glass gallery. She had been seriously ill all the winter, and Charles Thorn knew, though he believed that Lily did not, that her heart was in a very serious condition. Sir Arthur Hesketh had told Thorn, but to save his life Thorn could not make up his mind whether the old invalid was aware of her condition or not. It was so about so many things, now-a-days, at Yellowleaf. He knew dreadful things about Aghassy, and he didn't know whether Lady Mary knew them, for he had not told her; Lady Mary knew things about Charles that he didn't know she knew; they had both seen, though they had never discussed it, Lily's uneasiness and distress about something she had never mentioned to either of them, and, equally without discussion, they had watched her gradual blossoming into peace and something like happiness since Aghassy had gone to America. Then there was Bruno. Bruno knew that Lady Mary's heart was very bad; the nurse had told him, but he and Thorn had never talked it over together, so Bruno did not know how far Thorn's information went in the matter, and Bruno knew things about Lily that neither of the others could possibly have learned from anyone. They were a reserved lot, these Dampierres and Thorns, though they didn't realize that they expressed their feelings less than other people; but, during the last few months, each one of them had grown to feel that they were all in a

tangle of odd, insulated reserves and little secrets, and this had had the effect of making them all rather more talkative than usual, but always about unimportant, impersonal things. Lady Mary had had a great deal more to say than ever before about the books she was reading, and she and Charles fought horribly over the three versions of the story of Electra; Thorn maintaining that that of Sophocles was far and above the others, and Lady Mary swearing with much heat that Euripides, for humanity and knowledge of Woman, simply wiped the floor with both Sophocles and Æschylus. It was ridiculous, and they both felt it to be so, but these discussions really developed into a rancorous battle, the results of which were felt in a decided coolness between them for several days. Lily, who after the shock of her husband's elopement with her son had proved pathetically open to consolation on the subject from the smallest trifles she could find in Aghassy's favour, had soon settled down into looking at the matter like a well-meant joke of Aghassy's, and little by little a gentle little gaiety that had always been hers until something in his personality, devoted though he was to her, had crushed it, came back.

Thorn was sure, and he knew that Lady Mary and Bruno shared his certainty, that Lily was now happier than she had been at any time since her marriage, and each one of the three would occasionally catch one of the others looking at her in a pitying way that annoyed the onlooker, although he would be guilty of the same thing the next moment himself; and then, as the spring drew on and the time approached when the travellers

were to come back, Bruno's lucent eyes took to following his young mistress about in such an agony of regret and pitifulness that Charles once spoke to him about it.

"For Heaven's sake!" he said roughly in vigorous Italian metaphor, "stop looking at—Mrs. Aghassy—as if she were being crucified."

Bruno shrugged his shoulders gently. "It is when they come back," he answered in a respectful voice, "that her crucifixion will—continue."

Thorn said no more, but he understood. The two had never discussed Aghassy since the morning after the old man's visit to Mrs. Cuthbertson, but on that occasion Bruno had spared nothing, least of all his hearer, telling the whole story from the very beginning.

So the reserves that had sprung up between them had been tacit ones, referring to subsequent things, such as Aghassy's letters and Jimmy's, and the effects these letters had on the different members of the household.

That morning, as he and Lily joined Lady Mary in the glass gallery, Thorn felt as if the tangle of well-meant, sparing secrets, as if the little pretences that each of them had for the others, had suddenly become unbearable. He felt for a moment that he must break bounds and say to both these dear women exactly what he felt about Aghassy's postponing his return, and what he felt was vigorous and immediate; but, as he looked at the old woman's face, he knew that he could not speak. She had grown much older during the long winter and her struggle with her worn-out heart; the lines of her face seemed to have

struck in, and looked almost black in the bright sunlight. Her hands, too, the little capable, bejewelled hands he had always admired, had shrunk, and looked dry and bloodless.

For a long time the three of them sat there, glancing occasionally at each other, occasionally out into the winter-wizened garden: three people who loved each other, and trusted each other intensely, and yet who dwelt, each of them, all alone on a little island fashioned in the sea of their common, though secret, trouble. Isolation makes for shyness, but it most certainly makes for self-reliance, and even Lily Aghassy, who was the weakest of the three, felt herself, as she stitched away at one of her eternal white seams, to be a complete and independent entity needing no contact and no help from either of the others. It was Lady Mary who broke the long silence. "I've been thinking, dear," she said, turning a large diamond round and round her little finger, "that you and I were silly to be so upset yesterday by Jacques' letter."

Lily went to her with eager inclination. "That's exactly what I've been saying to Charles as I came downstairs, isn't it, Charles?" And Thorn, from his island, signalled back "Yes."

After a moment Lady Mary went on with a fine air of disinterested justice: "Far be it from me to deny, my dear, that I could willingly have choked Jacques yesterday, when the letter first came; but that was because I'd been selfishly longing to see Jimmy, and I was despondent; but after a good night's sleep I have come to the conclusion that it will do the boy a world

of good to see the Niagara Falls, and 'Chickago,' and the Yosemite Valley, and—and all those places."

As she spoke, she made an involuntary gesture with an imaginary needle through an imaginary canvas, and then with a little laugh dropped her hand on the fur rug that covered her poor chilly old knees.

"It was abominably selfish of Jacques not to realize how we missed the boy, and how you, of course, my love, want him; but after all, a musician like Jacques cannot belong exclusively to his wife; he's the world's property, and owes it to the world to distribute himself as generously as possible."

Lily looked up, her newly-happy little face very sweet with gratitude. "How right you are, Mamma!" she murmured. "I believe you understand him better than any of us." After a pause, she added with a certain acerbity to Thorn: "Mamma understands Jacques a great deal better than you, Gian!"

Gian, or Giovanni d'Medici, was one of his oldest nicknames, and as such he liked it; but in her voice there was something that hurt him, for like many stolid-seeming, indifferent-looking people, he was very sensitive and woefully easily wounded.

"I have never," he said, just an edge of resentment in his pleasant, deep voice, "pretended to understand your husband, Lily."

Lady Mary's heavy, deep-sunk eyes rested for a second on each of them in turn. Middle-aged people to many, they were to her almost pathetically young and helpless. She knew things about each of them that the other did not know, and the pathos that

belongs to every human being was in their two cases painfully visible to her. She loved them both, and it would have given her the keenest gratification to knock their heads together and to force them into a better understanding of each other.

"Ring the bell, will you, Charles?" she said sharply. "Arthur Hesketh's an idiot. I want my embroidery. I can't sit here and do nothing!"

So the huge *métier* was brought out and adjusted before her, and with a sigh of satisfaction, she filled a needle with cherry-coloured silk and resumed her work where she had left off almost exactly six months before.

III

"DEAR MOTHER," Jimmy's letter sent with Aghassy's had said, "Jacques has written to you and told you all about it. He was afraid you might not like our staying, but we are having such a splendid time I am sure you won't mind. Since we came back from Washington and Philadelphia things have been glorious. I don't believe even you have any idea how they adore him here. They're ever so much more musical than we are, you know. He has hundreds of albums every day that he has to sign, and Buckhardt signs most of them, I'm afraid. The only thing I don't like here is the clothes. I had to get new evening kit, and, though it cost three times what it would have done in London, there's something awfully funny about the shoulders. You'll be surprised when you see how I've grown, by the way! We shall be here in New York for another six weeks, and then we

go to Boston, and then to Newport, where we are going to stay with a Mrs. Cartwright, a very old friend of Jacques. The next place, I think, is somewhere up north, close to Canada, called Bar Harbor—mind you don't put a 'u' in the Harbour, because they can't stand it out here. We shall be there for the rest of the summer, and then after a final concert, with the Bach Concerto and those new Russian things that Gran loves, we start on the great tour. It's going to be great fun, and I do love going about with Jacques. You have no idea what a swell he is, and the funny part is that nobody treats him as if he was an Englishman. He seems less English, too, somehow, and he's let his hair grow, which really seems to suit him. There never was anybody in the world in the least like him. Sometimes he seems as old as God's grandfather, as they say here, and sometimes younger than me. He's awfully kind to me, and fearfully particular about my catching cold and all that kind of rot. Well, we're just going out to dinner, so I must stop. Best love to Grandmamma. I hope she's all right again. How's old Charles? I suppose he's looking after you and fussing about as usual. Good-bye, dearest All-Mine."

"JIM."

This letter to Lily, to Lady Mary, and to Charles Thorn, seemed practically three letters. They read it, all of them together, with a common meaning, but each one read it again alone with a secret and personal meaning, and the pearly spring days passed by one by one, bringing a brighter green to the winter-

bitten grass, a greater lift to the sky, a livelier smell, as of growing things, to the air. Spring was coming, hurrying along with its youthfully uncouth strides and back-slidings into winter, with its purpling of the tree-trunks and big boughs of the trees; and with, under the trees, its little pathetic, brave colonies of snow-drops, crocuses and narcissi. Then the dark, damp-looking boughs were blurred and frothed with little leaves, the sky colours grew stronger, the sunlight deepened in hue, and tulips came marching out through the earth in brave phalanxes, the practical, ready, Roman legions of the flower world.

CHAPTER XV

I

AFTERWARDS, looking back on the queer, blank year that followed that spring day, Lady Mary, Charles Thorn, and the old butler each found that its blankness, its uniform monotony was punctuated by a scene that he or she had with Lily.

Lady Mary's scene took place during a thunderstorm in May in her Corner, and although it passed by very quietly, she could always remember with curious distinctness the heavy rolling of the thunder and the hissing of the rain on the window above the mantelpiece. Thorn had been called to France by the illness of his brother, who for years had been a monk in the south of France, and Lady Mary's remark about him it was that started the conversation.

"Odd how one misses Charles, isn't it?" she said, peering through the gloom at her embroidery, and her hands paused over it. "For a dull man he's extraordinarily pleasant to have about."

Lily looked up from her work, some fluffy canary-coloured knitting, her eyes full of surprise.

"Do you think Charles is dull, Mamma? I don't."

The old lady laughed. "No, I don't suppose he's dull to me; if he was, we should not miss him; but most people think him so. Your uncle Dan did. And Mary Carbery was saying the other day that he bored her to tears."

Lily was indignant at this, and declared roundly that Lady Carbery was a silly old thing and bored her, Lily, most horribly, with her silly chatter about Bridge and the Play and other people's business. Jacques says——" she went on, and then stopped suddenly.

" Yes? What does Jacques say? " But Lily shook her head.

" Oh, it's not worth repeating, and I don't suppose he meant it. He often doesn't mean the dreadful things he says, I'm sure."

The old lady drew her needle and silk very slowly through her canvas, which now glowed and flamed in its approaching completeness with rich colours.

" I've never yet," she said after a moment, with great deliberation, " heard Jacques say an unkind word about anybody."

Lily's mind was engrossed with the neat turning of a corner in her knitting, so she noticed no special meaning in her mother-in-law's voice, and answered innocently: " Oh, of course he never would to you; but he does, you know, to me."

It was plain that Aghassy seemed so far away, that she had been so long lapped in the peace of his absence, that her nervous terror of him was passed, and Lady Mary, burdened with knowledge and, what was worse, half-knowledge about him, could not resist the opportunity, and went on in a lulling voice: " What kind of things does he say, my dear? He always seems unusually—what shall I say?—benevolent in his judgments. He has behaved, for instance, so particularly well about Charles."

Mrs. Aghassy started, and one of her knitting needles dropped on the floor with a little snapping noise. She bent over at once and prolonged her search for it, but Lady Mary's sharp eyes had seen the old, odd, haunted expression, and the agonized blush that swept up over her face. There was a long pause, and then the old lady said, in the voice of quiet authority that she so very seldom used: "My dear, don't you think it's about time that you told me why you are so afraid of Jacques?"

Lily looked at her furtively, and then, once more with growing courage, met her eyes steadily.

"I'm not afraid of him now," she said. "And I never had any real reason—I'm a coward, you know. You know how I behave about mice; and I was not very well for a while, I think."

Bruno's words, spoken so long ago, came into the old woman's alert mind—"The Signorina Lili doesn't always speak the truth now." And yet she would not have said that her daughter-in-law was lying to her as they sat there in the still, old house with the rain and thunder about them. Lily was not afraid now, that much was true. "Then if you are not afraid," the old woman resumed, "you must be very glad that they'll be back in the autumn."

"I—yes, I am glad. Won't it be fun to hear all Jimmy's adventures? By the way, I've not written, and I ought to; I think I will go and do it now."

Her artless attempt at escape was checked with unexpected severity. "Sit down, Lily. There's no good trying to fool me. I knew perfectly well the day the

letter came, that after the first shock of not seeing Jimmy as soon as you had expected, you were relieved by the news. You were glad—yes, *glad*, to be rid of Jacques for another six months.”

It was many years since she had spoken to her daughter-in-law, who was also her second cousin, in such a tone of authority, but she had no doubt that her old power was still there. It gave her, therefore, one of the shocks of her life when Mrs. Aghassy turned, her knitting gathered up in her arms, and said: “I think you forget, Mamma, that I’m nearly forty years old now, and not a child, even though I’m not clever like you and Charles. I don’t wish to be rude, and you know I love you very much; but I can’t allow you to say things about my husband.”

She walked very quietly up the long drawing-room and out into the hall, closing the door in her usual noiseless way; and Lady Mary sat for five minutes trying to digest the amazing and dignified rebuke that, she told herself, as the humour of the situation came to her rescue, she so richly deserved.

She had tried to break through the queer tangle woven through the house like a vast spider-web by the different things that were known and unknown about the strange man who now belonged to them, and she had failed. She knew that Lily would suffer when Aghassy came back, perhaps all the more for this time of independence and peace; but she also knew that she would never again dare to question her. It was insupportably galling to the proud and capable old lady to realize that her part of the drama must be that of a

passive looker-on. If Thorn had been in the house, the chances are that she would have broken her silence to him, as well, and told him what she knew, and feared, and asked him roundly as to his own knowledge and anticipations; but Thorn was in the south of France, in a monastery high up on a grilling yellow rock, sitting by what proved to be the death-bed of his only brother.

And that was Lady Mary's interview with Lily.

II

Bruno's interview with Lily took place during an attack of asthma that he had towards the middle of July. He had begun to recover, and was sitting in his beloved velvet dressing-gown with his back to the closed window through which a blazing sun was drenching him. He had been in no danger, and everyone in the house was used to his asthmatic attacks; but he had suffered a good deal, and looked worn and markedly older, as he sat there reading the *Corriere della Sera*, which Florentine newspaper he had taken in throughout all his life in England. Presently he heard the sound of a lightly-built person coming up the stairs, and letting his spectacles slide to the end of his handsome nose, he looked over them, smiling in anticipatory welcome, towards the door.

It was Lily, and in each hand she held a monstrous, downy, rose and gold peach. These delightful specimens she had brought him as a little gift, and, when he had thanked her and assured her of his steady progress, and she had told him that although Her Excel-

lency missed him a great deal, she was doing very well without him, there was a short silence. Then Lily took from a bag she carried in lieu of a pocket—for she was a born mislayer of small useful objects—Picotee's last letter, and another letter.

"Miss Picotee is having a beautiful time," she said, "and the waters are doing her a great deal of good."

Bruno nodded. "Yes. The Signor Conte Giuliano used to go to German baths. It appears there's iron in the water, and it helps young people who are growing. Very soon, Signora," the old fellow added, "Signorina Picotee will be a young lady, and we shall have to have a ball for her."

Lily nodded a little absently. "Yes, she's seventeen, and Mrs. Clinton writes that she's very tall and is going to have a lovely figure."

"For my taste," the old servant remarked respectfully, "she's too tall. I think a lady should never be so tall as a gentleman."

Lily laughed. "Oh, that's only because Her Excellency is little."

He smiled in answer, and then she read him the greater part of the young girl's letter, in every part of which he was quite as interested as any other member of the household.

The suddenly anæmic Miss Dampierre was at Schwalbach, and her letter was full of lively and rather shrewd descriptions of her fellow-patients. It ended up with a long panegyric of her last letter from her stepfather, which had been a very long and particularly delightful one. "Jacques writes the best letter in the

world," she said, "but it makes me boil to think that Jinks is having all the fun of being with him all this time. Next time he goes away I shall make him take me. Of course, everybody here is fearfully interested in him, just as the girls at school were, and I've written to beg him to send me a new photograph. I bought one in a shop in Frankfurt the other day, but it is beastly, and makes him look like a foreigner. . . ."

"It's a nice letter, isn't it?" Lily remarked, folding it up. "Now here's one from Master Jimmy, that I know you will enjoy. He's having a splendid time at a place called Newport. He says the people live in palaces that are called cottages, and they must be enormously rich, from what he says——"

After glancing through the letter she handed it to the old man, for she had seen one of the gardeners doing something she didn't like, and, going to the other window, opened it and called out some directions. Bruno read slowly, not because Jimmy's round hand-writing was a difficult one, but because he wished to draw from the letter every scrap of information he could. When he had finished it he folded it slowly, and pushed his spectacles once more further from his eyes.

"The Signorino," he observed slowly, his eyes fixed on her face, "seems to be growing up."

Lily started. "Growing up! How absurd! It isn't even spelt properly, the letter——"

"Perhaps not, Signora; but what he *says*, he says less like a little boy than like a young man. Haven't you noticed that?"

Mrs. Aghassy had not noticed it, and the idea

seemed to give her pain. She stood there in the sun clasping and unclasping her hands for a moment, and then burst out in a way more familiar to the old man, in whose eyes she had remained almost a child, than it would have been either to Lady Mary or Charles.

"Oh, Bruno!" she said, "I don't want Jim to grow up there in America. I'd rather—I'd rather it was here. Oh, I wish it was October!"

"So do I," agreed Bruno with gravity.

For several minutes there was again silence, her face in its unrestrained anxiety looking older and haggard. "Mr. Aghassy will take the greatest care of him, of course, Bruno," she said at length. "He really loves him. But—I can't help being anxious somehow, I don't know why——"

The old man watched her, and the pity in his eyes was as great as the distress in hers, for with each other these two old friends talked with their visors up; and suddenly she noticed his expression, and started towards him. "Bruno! Bruno! What is it?" she cried passionately. "You know something, I'm sure you do! You have noticed! You have seen! Tell me what it is!"

And she stamped her foot in the peremptoriness of her wish to make him speak. But he had long since made up his mind that his must be a rôle of patient passivity. He knew what he knew, but how could he help things, and what good would his telling do! Jacques was thousands of miles away, and Lily was here. Poor little Signora! It was an article of faith to this old man to protect and cherish the members of his old mistress's family, but the only protection

he could offer now was that of restoring to this agitated woman the relieved peace that for many months now had been hers.

“Signorina! Signorina!” he said gently, as his clever eyes instantly assumed a look of grave and innocent wonder. “Why are you angry? What do you mean? How could I possibly know anything? I who am only a servant!”

The immense dignity of his manner restored her own to her, and with a little laugh, she excused her outburst on the score of the unusual heat which had now lasted several weeks.

“I don’t sleep very well,” she said, “and it makes me short-tempered. Now I must go down to Her Excellency; she will be glad, old friend, that you are better.”

At the door she turned, a pathetically unsuccessful smile on her lips. “Mind, you enjoy your peaches,” she said.

And this, unimportant though it seems, was the talk that Bruno was to remember as the most vital thing in that long hot summer.

III

Thorn’s talk took place after dinner one evening in mid-August; he did not come to London until the end of June, and the six weeks following his return had been, owing to the death of his brother, unusually busy ones for him. He had had business to get through with lawyers, and bankers, and twice he had gone down by the sea in Sussex where lay the much

shrunken estate that was now his. His brother, who had become a monk during his childhood, he had hardly known, and naturally could not miss him much; but such an upheaval as the death of the head of one's family is always moving, and there had been papers to go through, tenants to see, and Thorn had come back to Yellowleaf looking a little older, a little sadder, than before.

On that August evening, after one of the hottest days of an abnormally hot summer, it was about ten o'clock, and Lady Mary had gone to her room, and Lily upstairs. Thorn, oppressed by the heat and the breathlessness, wandered up and down the big drawing-room a few moments, looking at a picture here, examining a bronze a little farther on, and then, turning a corner, stood staring into the fern-filled fireplace that was exactly opposite Lady Mary's Corner. The door into the big conservatory was open, and its great windows were thrust open, out into the moonlight; the smell of damp growing things, though so pleasant on a cold day, was oppressive that hot night, and, lighting a cigarette, Thorn left the room and walked down the long, cool passage towards the open door of the glass gallery. Perhaps because of the heat, which always made him jumpy, his mind was full of unwelcome thoughts of Aghassy and his approaching return.

He was not a weak man, but he was not essentially a man of action as Aghassy, curiously enough, was; but he was now in the unpleasant, almost intolerable position of hating, for his cousin, things as they were, and yet being unable to think of any alternative for

her. As he passed the door of Aghassy's room he paused, and then on a sudden impulse went in. Through the three windows the moonlight poured in, for Aghassy's bright green eyes were as strong as an animal's, and he loathed curtains and blinds. The piano was shut, of course, but it was not locked, and Thorn opened it and stood looking down at its shining keys. It occurred to him that if the fool that invented pianos had never been born, Lily would never have married Aghassy. It was the piano that was responsible for the disastrous match, and, exasperated by the sustained heat and the thunderous air, he closed it quickly and drew back, as if it had been a sentient thing and he was afraid of losing his temper with it. The room was as empty as a constantly inhabited room can be, but it seemed haunted that night, and thronged with countless Aghassys, every one of whom Charles Thorn hated, and would have loved to throttle. It was a relief to him to allow his pent loathing to surge up uncontrolled, to shake him with passion and distort, as he knew it was distorting, his face. He felt the sweat start out on his forehead, and in his heart he knew that at that moment he was practically a murderer. And this knowledge, instead of alarming him, caused him a keen, dark joy.

He moved his jaw slowly from side to side, as was his way when very angry, without opening his mouth, and then suddenly he saw, standing in the dark passage, her face in the moonlight full of terror, Lady Mary's maid, Drake. The woman was evidently frightened to death by him and, for a moment, they stared

at each other in silence, while Thorn felt his face slowly melt into its usual aspect. He tried to laugh, and he tried to speak, but his throat was dry and his tongue heavy in his mouth, and before he could form a sound, he was alone, the woman having fled away noiselessly into the shadows. Wiping his face on his handkerchief, Thorn went out across the glass gallery where the windows were open to let in the air, and down the steps across the lawn to the fountain, where he stood, his arms folded, gazing blindly at the little column of water as it broke into a million pale jewels in the moonlight. "There's another thing," he thought drearily, "I shall never be able to mention. Damn it all! The house is bewitched. All these dreadful little silences! They're turning it into a kind of tomb!" It was very quiet; in the high-walled garden the shadows of the trees and bushes looked solid, like blocks of stone, and the moonlight seemed too bright in the heat. The beautiful old fountain with its two stone figures was a favourite of Thorn's. It was a kind of game with him to try and decide what long-forgotten god and goddess the weather-beaten, graceful man and woman represented, and there was something quieting in the steady gush of the water. Presently he sat down on the fluted brink and tried to turn his thoughts away from Aghassy. He had heard the clock in the hall strike half-past ten when the sound of footsteps roused him, and turning, he saw Lily running down the steps. She was still in evening-dress, but she had thrown a little gauzy, rose-coloured scarf over her shoulders, and there was something in her hand.

"Oh, Charles!" she cried in a sharp quick voice very unlike her own. "'I've had a telegram. They're not coming back. What shall I do? What shall I do?'"

Thorn took the telegram and read it. It was rather long and, after saying that Aghassy was not well and that a specialist advised a southern sea journey, added that he and Jimmy were consequently going to California, and could sail from there to Japan and thence to Australia. The cablegram ended with affectionate greetings and promises of an early letter.

Thorn stopped in the middle of it, smitten with a kind of terror, for Lily was crying, and he hadn't seen her cry for years. She looked very little and child-like with her hands pressed over her face, but her crying was so dreadfully unlike that of a child that Thorn really thought for a moment that he couldn't bear it. This, then, was why he had been so haunted all the evening by Aghassy's dark spirit; this blow had been on its way. He read the telegram through to the end and then put it in his pocket.

"Listen, Lily," he said steadily. "You mustn't cry like that, it's silly. I've heard you say yourself that it would be good for Jimmy to see something of the world, and—and what good care Aghassy would take of him. Don't cry! Don't!"

But to his horror she knelt down on the brink of the fountain and, bending her head and face almost to her knees, went on sobbing in that dreadful way. He walked to the edge of the lawn and back without speaking. He might as well have spoken to the fountain and told it to dry its waters as tell his little cousin to

dry her tears, and he knew it. After what seemed a long time he said once more in that stern, chiding voice: "You really are being an idiot, Lily. It's only a matter of two or three months, and you know he'll take good care of Jinks."

At these words she turned without rising, and lifted up her tear-drenched, anguished face. "Do *you* think he'll take good care of him?" she asked sharply, a new edge in her voice.

Thorn stared at her in honest bewilderment. "Of course he will," he returned. "And you know it."

But still without moving, she persisted: "On your word of honour, you think he will take care of him?"

Thorn's relief was great, for he had no doubt that Aghassy would look after the boy who was to be so rich, and there was no reason why he should tell the boy's mother that he knew her husband to be doing everything in his power to attach his stepson to himself *because* of this future wealth. Charles knew that Aghassy intended to enjoy young Jimmy's fortune when it came to him, but he could do no good by telling Lily this, so it lightened his heart immensely to give the word of honour she had asked for, and with a sigh of relief he watched her face clear a little as she rose.

"Lend me your handkerchief, Charles," she said. He did so, and she dried her eyes and blew her nose, and gradually calmed down.

"It's the weather, this awful heat, that made you do that," he said kindly after a minute. "Let's sit down here and talk things over." She obeyed, as she

usually did obey unimportant orders of the kind. When they read the telegram again Thorn expressed a wish to know what was the matter with Aghassy. "I can't imagine him being ill, somehow," he said.

"Oh, he isn't ill," she returned with a calmness that was astonishing to him after the recent storm. "He only *says* that."

Thorn looked disgusted, for he had not suspected Aghassy of being a liar.

"You don't mean to say he would make up a yarn like that?"

She nodded, dipping a corner of his handkerchief into the fountain and holding it over her hot eyes.

"Oh yes, he would," she said; "to save my feelings, you know. He's very kind, Jacques is."

"But well, damn it all, Lily," Thorn broke out, puzzled to the pitch of uncontrollable impatience. "You suspect the man of ill-treating or neglecting Jim, and yet you think he's very kind! It's perfectly ridiculous."

She dipped the handkerchief again into the water and, turning, looked at him. "I know," she said simply. "It is ridiculous, but I can't explain; and yet it really is kindness. You see, he had made up his mind to take Jinks to Australia, and he thought that it would not hurt me so much if I believed there was a *real* reason—not just because he wanted to."

Thorn grunted. "I see. I hope he won't teach any of these dirty tricks to Jimmy." He started up. "By God! I believe I'll go on after them. I could easily catch them up."

There was a pause, and then she said piteously, a little break in her voice: "Oh no, Charles! You mustn't go. I could not bear to have you away, too."

He didn't move, and his grim face, set with his resolution, was unchanged; but after a minute he answered her. "I don't see what good I do here—I'm about the most useless devil alive; but if I went out there, I could at least see that he's not teaching your son to be a sneak and a liar."

A far-off clock struck eleven, its deep velvety voice very distinct in the sultry stillness. "I must go in now," Lily said, squeezing the water out of his handkerchief. "Good-night."

She held out her hand, and he took it, and, after looking at him for a moment, she bent down and kissed his great fingers.

"Charles, dear Charles!" she said. "Please don't go. You were perfectly right. I was silly, and of *course* Jacques will take care of Jimmy; and Mamma and I could not bear it without you——"

Then she sped away over the sun-burnt grass, and up the steps, and into the dark, mysterious house.

Thorn stood for a long time thinking about her, and how little she had grown up, and what a child she still was; then, very slowly, he, too, left the fountain and went into the house.

CHAPTER XVI

I

WHEN Aghassy and Jimmy finally did get back from their travels, two years all but a month after they had left England, Thorn went down into Sussex for a few days. Until the evening before their arrival he had had no intention of leaving, but it had come over him suddenly, as he and Lady Mary and Lily sat over the fire in the old lady's Corner—the last of so many, many times that they would be alone there—that he could not face the arrival itself. The strength went out of him at the thought of the different stages of what was sure to be to everyone in the house a painful ceremony; the stopping of the car at the gate, the opening of the garden-door, and then Bruno standing in the lighted hall, the taking off of great-coats and mufflers—for winter had set in already, although it was only October—and the greetings.

Angry with himself at his weakness, and yet strong in facing the fact that it was a weakness he could not overcome, Thorn decided to run away. He knew that Lily, for all her immense happiness in her son's return, was yet filled with fear about it. He had known for a long time now that, whereas he had a basis of sinister facts for his loathing of Aghassy, and that she could not possibly know these facts, or any others to justify her terror, she was yet more terrified, more in dread of the man, through some instinctive knowledge of his

capabilities, than he. He knew, too, that it was beyond him to watch this horrible premonitory fear increase in her mind as the hour of her husband's return grew nearer. He told Lady Mary and Lily, as they said good-night, that he found he was obliged to go down to Drax on business. Lady Mary, who had been a good deal stronger of late and had not alarmed them by a fainting-fit for several months, smiled at him, not without malice.

"Dear me! How disappointed you must be!" she returned, her old eyes aglow with mischief.

Lily said nothing, but he knew that each of them knew that he was running away; he knew that neither of them would mention it to the other; and he knew that both of them knew that he knew that they knew. The web of small intangible reserves had grown with the passing of time, and was very strong indeed now. . . . So early the next morning he motored down into the pleasant land of Sussex by the sea, where his little old house lay folded away among the downs. . . . a little old fortified place it was, that had escaped the blighting hand of the Victorian restorer through the merciful fact that the Thorns had been amongst the poorest gentry in England until Charles's grandfather had found coal on a small estate of theirs in the north. So there it stood, a small, squat building, looking very nearly akin to the earth from which it sprung; and there Charles Thorn, its present lord, lived through three interminable days of unrelieved misery and suspense.

He had made up his mind that he would give

Aghassy a fair chance, and he kept his word; but on the morning of the third day he was called to the telephone, and when finally he could hear who was speaking, he realized that it was Lily's voice, with a break and a quiver in it that made him grind his teeth as he listened.

"Is that you, Charles?" it said, that poor little voice. "Oh, why don't you come back? What are you doing there so long?"

He forced himself to say he had been busy; and then she went on: "I'm at the underground station. It's so cold and horrible here. Please come back! Can't you come to-day?"

"I'll be in the train in half an hour; it's quicker than the car. But what's the matter, Lily? I must know what to expect when I get there. Is Aunt Mary all right?"

"Yes, yes!" she answered impatiently, as if Lady Mary was not of the least consequence. "It's Jim, Charles. It's Jim. Oh, how I hate America, and all those nasty Americans!"

He knew enough now, and told her that he would come at once; and after listening for a moment to the blankness that followed her hanging up of the receiver, went and told his man to get his things ready, and less than half an hour later was in the train bound for London. Bound for trouble, bound, he knew, for helpless misery, and yet, through it all, both ready and glad to go.

II

Thorn had a latch-key, but as he bent to open the door with it, he found Bruno crossing the hall to the dining-room with the big silver tea-tray in his hands. The old man stood still as the door opened, staring over the débris of bread-and-butter and cake and tea-cups without a word, and Thorn, who had spent the time in the train foolishly trying to persuade himself that nothing was wrong but Lily's nerves, stared back at him in uncontrollable dismay. "Well, Bruno!"

"Yes, Mr. Thorn . . . *tanti scusi*, My Lord!"

"What's the matter?"

The tray was very heavy, and Bruno looked old and shaky as he went into the dining-room and rid himself of his burden. The horrid feeling of having been there before, of having gone through the whole ghastly experience somehow, somewhere or other, already, swept over Charles with the horrid weakening effect that most people know.

"How's Master Jim?" he asked sharply.

Bruno made a little helpless gesture. "There's no Master Jim," he answered sadly. "I'm to call him Mr. Dampierre."

There was a pause. The electric light was turned on, but the blinds were not yet drawn down, and there was in the room the curious melancholy that comes of the mingling of artificial with natural light. Thorn glanced round him, and everything seemed strange. The clusters of beautiful fruits coloured with inimitable delicacy and richness, the heavy ivory-coloured curtains, stretching in long, fine sweeps from the cornice

to the floor, the broad, finely-polished table and the pictures of still life under the lights—none of these things seemed real; the room might have been a perfectly strange one. Bruno looked odd and unsubstantial; Thorn himself felt that perhaps he, too, with his long, bony body, and his ugly, suffering face, just visible in a blurred mirror, might be a creature of his own imagination. . . .

The trouble was, it seemed, when he had forced Bruno to speak, that Jimmy was so changed, so terribly changed; he was taller, it appeared, than any youth of nineteen had a right to be; he looked ill, and inconceivably excited and nervous. But even that was not the worst; he was changed, entirely, changed; his kindness and all his childish little ways had gone, and although he looked so dreadfully ill, no one, not even his lordship, Bruno thought, would dare take the friendliest, most loving, of liberties with him.

The old man's poor hands shook as he spoke, for this chronicle was dreadful to him. "Thank God you're back, My Lord!" he murmured. . . . "*Dio ne sia lusingato!*"

Having been told that Aghassy and Jimmy were out together, Charles, after a few words of inadequate encouragement to the old servant, made his way quietly upstairs to Lily's sitting-room. She was huddled over the fire with a shawl over her shoulders, and when she saw him she gave a dreadful little wailing cry that was very nearly his undoing. He put his arms round her and kissed her forehead in a kind, brotherly way. Then he sat down and bade her talk, in a voice of such authority that she could not disobey him.

It was Jim, she said, poor little Jinks, who was so tall—so tall and, oh, so dreadfully changed——

“Of course he’s changed, dear; it’s two years since you’ve seen him. He was a little boy when he went away, and now he’s a—man.”

Jacques Aghassy’s wife looked up, her face dreadful in its disregarded, undisguised abandonment of unbecoming grief. “He’s not a man,” she answered fiercely. “He’s not a man at all, any more than he’s a child—any more than he’s a baby; he’s—oh, Charles!—he’s *dreadful*——”

Charles noticed that her eyeballs had a horrid, shiny look, as if they had been made of some strange marble that he had never seen before. “A boy of nineteen,” he murmured, cursing himself for his own feebleness, “really *isn’t* either a man or a child, he’s something betwixt and between. . . .”

Sitting down, he drew his chair closer to her and took her dry hot hands. “Lily dear,” he said, “you’re not being reasonable, and you must be. The boy’s been through an exciting time, his nerves are probably all wrong. . . . Aghassy naturally would not understand that, having magnificent nerves himself. . . .” As he spoke he felt the ridiculous, tragic falsity of his words; it was a part of the whole thing, the whole dreadful fabric that had been woven in the last few years in the dark silence of the old house; he knew that he was lying with his heart, if not altogether with his words. Lily looked up, her little worn face white as a candle. “You don’t know,” she said in a strangely quiet, resentful voice. “You don’t know, and I do. . . .”

Suddenly she rose and, spreading out her arms with a gesture of reckless courage: "You said he would take care of him; you gave me your word of honour that you thought he would; and now he brings him back like . . . this!" Her eyes looked tired and hot, as if they had never known a tear; as if their very brightness would be their ruin. Charles thought as he watched her that death, torture, annihilation, anything would be better than this.

"Look here, Lily," he said suddenly, standing up. "I can't stand much of this. You don't realize—you never have—that I can ache, too. I—I think I will go now . . ." and he made for the door. . . . He could remember nothing afterwards of his stumbling progress to his own room, but when he locked his door he blundered to the window, which he wrenched open, and falling on his knees, stayed there for a long time face to face with the struggling, cloud-trammelled moon. He swore, he protested, he blasphemed, and he prayed. Then, finally, half-unconscious of what he was doing, he managed to get his clothes off, and to go to bed, when he slept as unconscious as any dead man of them all, until late the next morning.

III

The first thing that Thorn noticed as the day went on, was that, whereas young Dampierre's elaborately correct clothes bore distinct signs of their transatlantic origin, Aghassy's might that morning have come from his London tailor's. But for his queer face he would have looked like an unusually well-dressed English

gentleman; but the boy had acquired odd gestures and movements, and looked like the unpleasant American-Parisian hybrids who consort with the golden youth of Chili and Argentina at the Ritz in Paris. Besides the fact of his looking desperately ill, his face had changed; his eyes moved too quickly, his immature mouth looked weak, and his lips twitched as he talked. And he did talk! His volubility positively embarrassed the word-shy folk he had come back to. It made Thorn feel, and for all his travels and his three languages, a primitive islander of the most narrow type.

At dinner he chattered in the spasmodic way that was so new to them, describing the places he had seen, the people he had met; but there was in his flow of words sudden, grown-up reticences, quickly repressed smiles that were almost grins, at things remembered but not expressed.

Aghassy, who listened with an indulgent air, putting in a word now and then, once or twice checked a laugh and murmured an expostulation. "Oh, come," he said once, "you can't tell your mother and grandmother *that*, you know!" Adding to Lady Mary with an irreproachable air of fatherly excuse: "He's a young villain, you know, Lady Mary."

The old lady, who was magnificent that evening in lace and velvet and jewels, listened courteously, her fine little face expressive of polite interest and amusement. She had always met trouble with an uplift of spirit, and trouble was coming now.

"Thank God," she thought, "that I am so much

stronger, for there's going to be the very devil to pay for this."

Lily had ordered a very good dinner in honour of the occasion, and taken great care to have all the favourite dishes of the travellers. Oysters there were, and turtle soup—one of Aghassy's few degustatory weaknesses—asparagus, shoulder of lamb, and game, and plum-pudding and ices for Jimmy. Aghassy expressed gratitude at her thoughtfulness, but the boy declared the oysters tasted of copper, and refused the asparagus, being "fed up" with the better foreign kind.

They had come back from Australia via India, and he was very boyish for a moment as he described the table joys of that wonderful country. "The curries are perfectly bully," he declared, "not a bit like the English ones; and as for the fruit, pawpaws and mangoes are the best things in the world!"

"Did you see Sir William Boleyn?" Lady Mary asked. "I wrote to him about you——"

Jimmy glanced at Aghassy, an odd look in his face, and it was Aghassy who answered:

"Yes, we saw him, but—we weren't exactly a success with him, were we, Jingle?"

His smile was altogether benevolent-looking, but Lady Mary knew that it exasperated Thorn, as well as herself, almost to boiling-point.

Jim scowled, and bit his nails. "No—I made a fool of myself—might as well tell you, for he's sure to write, the old idiot——"

There was a pause, and then Lily said quietly: "Well, tell us what it was——"

The boy looked up at her, plainly touched by the sweetness of her voice, and a quick flush beautified and made more familiar his thin face. "I—it was an awfully hot evening," he said with an effort, "and I—I had too much champagne——"

Lily leaned back in her chair as if she had had a blow, and Aghassy broke in, in that new tolerant air of his. "Don't exaggerate, old man," he murmured. "It wasn't so very bad——"

Jim turned on him. "You hold your tongue, Jacques," he cried fiercely. "It *was* bad. I was beastly drunk, Mother, and—old Boleyn had me put to bed!"

Charles raised his glass. "Well done, Jinks! I mean your owning up, naturally, not your getting drunk!"

Everyone laughed and the episode was over, but Lady Mary caught Charles's eye, and each of them read in the other's a new, strong determination.

"This ends our old way of going on," their eyes told each other. "To the deuce with our idiotic silences. After this we'll *talk!*"

But when dinner was over and they were all sitting once more in Lady Mary's Corner, things were better.

Aghassy finished his coffee quickly, and without a word went to the piano.

His music seemed more beautiful than ever to the three stay-at-homes, and under its influence they were all a little ashamed of their terror and wrath at dinner. Jimmy lay down on a little sofa, as Aghassy reminded him to do, and listened with his eyes shut. Lady Mary

watched him; his mother watched him; Charles watched him; and then they exchanged with each other glances of relief and hope.

For as he lay there, his restless eyes shut, his nerves soothed and comforted by the music, he looked more of the child Jimmy; all the piteous, ugly expressions that had so alarmed them were softened and nearly obliterated.

Aghassy chose his music with his usual uncanny skill; and suddenly in the middle of it Charles rose and left the room. He felt that he could and would not be cajoled by the fellow's playing; there was a reckoning between Aghassy and him, and Aghassy should not evade it. . . . It was a cold, punishing night, but Charles took up a hat and made for the open. At the door he saw Bruno busy in the drawing-room, and after a moment's hesitation he went in.

"I say, Bruno——"

"Yes, My Lord?"

"What do you think of Mr. Jim?"

Into the veiled, reserved mental air of the house the abrupt, direct question seemed almost to crash.

The old servant drew a deep breath as if it had cleared the atmosphere, and his fine eyes glowed with gratitude as he answered as directly, in Italian: "It is dreadful, sir."

Charles nodded. "Yes. Appalling. Telephone for Doctor Hesketh the first thing in the morning, will you? Tell him to come to see *me*."

"Yes, My Lord. . . ."

Thorn turned to go, but at the door he looked back.

"We are in for a bad time, Bruno," he said gravely, "but we'll come through all right. Thank God I'm joint guardian, and he's just nineteen——"

"Yes. With respect speaking, sir, it would be well if you talked to Her Excellency about it. . . ."

"Oh, I can't tell her—you know—the things you told me. . . ."

"Her Excellency will not be surprised, My Lord," the old man returned with perfect calm. "She doesn't know what La Signora Cussberson told me, but Her Excellency is extraordinarily intelligent, and she hates him, too. . . ."

For a servant to call his mistress "extraordinarily intelligent" would sound odd in English, but in Italian it did not strike Thorn as being out of the way; and, moreover, he knew that Bruno was right. Lady Mary's keen mind would, now that the web was going to be swept away, be of great help to him in his task. So he nodded: "Yes, I will talk to Her Excellency; but—Bruno, Mrs.—the Signora Lili mustn't know. . . ."

The old man smiled with a certain hiss of respectful tolerance. "Ah, My Lord," he declared, "the poor Signora Lili, although she knows no facts, *realizes* more clearly than Her Excellency or your Lordship. Have you not seen how she fears him?"

Then he added softly, voicing the hatred that Thorn knew to be, in himself, so dangerous: "May he have an accident, and die without confession, and be buried with dogs. . . ."

Thorn walked up and down the blustery road for an hour, and when he came in was told that Lady Mary wanted him.

The music had ceased, and Aghassy and the two women sat by the newly replenished fire.

"Jimmy has gone to bed," Lady Mary explained, as Thorn glanced at the sofa.

He sat down, and for a moment there was silence. The silence was broken in a surprising way by Aghassy, who gave a soft, pleasant laugh, and then said to Thorn: "Well, Charles, out with it! You are upset about Jim, and longing to tear me to pieces, aren't you?"

"I am not longing to tear you to pieces," Thorn answered quietly, "but I certainly, as the boy's other guardian, wish an explanation. Why have you allowed him to get into this condition?"

Aghassy turned to his wife. "What did I tell you, darling?" he said whimsically. "He thinks it all my fault!"

Thorn rose. "Look here, Aghassy," he said, his face and voice very stern, "we must have a long talk, you and I, and it isn't going to be a very pleasant one. Shall we go to your study, or will you come up to my room?"

Aghassy, too, got up. His face had changed. "Wherever you like," he returned.

There was a pause, which Lady Mary's voice broke. "Sit down, both of you. This matter of Jim concerns his mother and grandmother quite as much as it does his stepfather and second cousin."

Aghassy stared at her. It was the first time she had ever openly challenged him. After a moment he sat down, crossing his legs, and taking out his little bag of tobacco and his case of cigarette-papers. "Just as

you wish, Lady Mary," he said courteously. "There are things about the boy I should rather not have told Lily and you, but as you insist. . . ." He shrugged his shoulders.

Thorn had remained standing, and after a moment he said quietly: "You are right, Aunt Mary, and neither you nor Lily will be foolish enough to object to plain speaking. . . . Aghassy, I repeat my question, why have you let your wife's son get into this horrible condition?"

"You exaggerate, of course, but I'll answer you. Jim has given me very serious trouble, and I have been most worried about him; but there's no doubt but he'll come through all right if . . ." he paused and glanced at Thorn, "*if you are patient enough with him!*"

"Well, upon my word!" It was Lady Mary who burst out, voicing in the homely exclamation the ridiculous, helpless resentment they all felt at this brilliantly skilful turning of the tables. Aghassy smiled; it was plain to Charles that a row was the last thing the fellow wanted. "Yes, I mean it—patient. He's not a bit worse than lots of other boys of his age, but severity—too great severity—might drive him to anything. As you suggest, Thorn, Jinks is only my stepson, but I daresay I know him better, as he now is, than any of you."

"No doubt you do," Lady Mary agreed, "and as you do, suppose you—explain him to us."

Aghassy lit a cigarette. "There's nothing particular to explain. He's wild, and a bit fast—smokes too much, drinks too much, and took to cards as readily as I understand his father did at his age——"

"Wait a minute, Jacques," Lily, who had kept an unbroken silence till now, interrupted him sharply. "Please don't mention my husband. I—won't have it."

To Thorn's amazement this remark seemed to cause Aghassy keen pain; he darted a jealous glance at his wife. "Your *first* husband," he corrected her. "I meant no harm, Lily. There's no harm in saying that as a boy he gambled."

"None at all, Lily. Go on, Jacques."

As she spoke, Lady Mary leaned forward and took her daughter-in-law's hand, and held it in hers as the talk went on.

"I've done, naturally, all I could to make the young beggar see reason," Aghassy went on, in a very convincing way. "I even got a doctor to threaten him with illness, but——"

Thorn looked up. "A doctor! Look here, Aghassy, this is all very well and very clever. You are a good deal cleverer than I, but you can't put me off with words. That Jim likes drink and cards is not the point—though it was you who taught him to like wine; the point is that not only is his health wrecked, but his mind is all wrong. If I thought you'd understand me I'd say that you've got his *soul* all wrong."

Lily squeezed the old lady's delicate hand so hard that it hurt. Charles had said it now, said straight out what they had all been thinking, and there was a relief in coming out into the storm after being, so to say, huddling in a stuffy, unhygienic shelter.

"Yes—his soul," Lily murmured. Then she rose. "I'm going up to him, Mamma," she said; "after all, he is only a child, and I'm going to talk to him. . . ."

They let her go on the errand they all felt to be hopeless, and when the door had closed, Thorn said to his aunt that she had better let him and Aghassy leave her and finish their talk alone.

"Will you come up to my room?" he added, turning fiercely to Aghassy.

Aghassy gazed at him, a green light in his slanting eyes.

"*Your room,*" he repeated slowly and very softly. "May I ask if you have been—er—living here during the two years of my absence?"

"Yes. As my guest." The old woman's voice was in marked contrast to his, in its incisive authority.

"I beg your pardon, but may I observe that, though the house is yours, my wife is—mine!"

"*Aghassy!*"

Thorn took a step forward, and Aghassy had risen, but it was Lady Mary who spoke.

"Charles, hold your tongue! Can't you see what he's trying to do? He wants to force you to quarrel, so"—the old woman was so erect in her chair that it seemed as if she was about to step out of it—"so that you will have to go away and leave Jimmy to him!"

For a moment Aghassy was at a loss, and stood with his lowered head moving from side to side, like an angry bull not knowing where to charge. Then he laughed. "Very well," he said; "I've tried to keep the peace, but you want war, and you shall have it. Your precious young Jim is as scoundrelly a little beast as I ever saw in my life—though I'm fond of him in a way—and I am doing my best to help him through his bad years. But"—he paused and stared dully and

menacingly at Thorn—"I don't mean to stand any interference with my stepson from a man who only stays here because he's in love with my wife."

Thorn in his helplessness barely stifled a groan, and Lady Mary answered for him.

"Don't be an utter ass, Jacques," she shot at him, "and don't pretend to be stupid. Of course Charles is in love with Lily. He has been for twenty-five years. She's probably the only person in the world who doesn't know it. But you know as well as I that that old feeling—which is as much a part of himself as his head is—has nothing whatever to do with his feeling for Jimmy. He's the boy's guardian, and he objects to the way you've used your powers during the last two years, and so do I, and therefore your powers have got to be weakened. That's all."

There was something very fine in the crippled old woman's dauntlessness, there between the two powerful, deeply stirred men, and each, in his way, paid tribute to her.

Thorn laid his hand on her shoulder, saying simply: "Thank you, Aunt Mary—I'm going now . . ." and Aghassy bowed in his un-English way.

"You are a good enemy, Lady Mary," he murmured, "and, though you are very unjust to me, I admire you. Thorn and I will go on with our talk tomorrow and come to some decision——. Good-night." At that he left them, and through two closed doors they heard him playing his own piano very quietly.

Lady Mary looked up at her nephew. "Poor Charles!" she said gently. "I'm sorry he knows, but it doesn't really matter much . . ."

He shook his head. "No, *that* doesn't matter—— Thank God you were here when—when he said that——"

"Yes. You mustn't see him alone to-morrow. Remember, if you quarrel there will be no one to help Jim——"

He turned to the fire for a moment, and when he looked round she saw that his eyes were wet.

"I do love her, Aunt Mary," he said in a low voice, "and I ought to go; I—I suppose I should *not* have stayed on, but—but on my honour, it never entered my mind to do anything *but* stay . . ."

"Of course it didn't, my dear," she returned, her remarkable lashes shining with the scant tears of old age; "this is your home."

The deep-voiced clock in the hall struck half-past eleven, and Thorn started.

"We must get Arthur Hesketh to insist on school—or a crammer's; he can say regular hours, etc., are necessary for his health. I—I can't stay on here. I *couldn't* do it," he finished, a little wildly. "It isn't quite what you think, Aunt Mary—I mean, it isn't just a—a calm affection——"

She laughed. "You gaby! Of course it isn't! I'd have died years ago if it had been. Oh, I know. I've seen you suffer, my poor Charles!"

Their extraordinary frankness, now that the barriers were down, did not strike either of them. He bent and kissed her soft old cheek.

"Good-night—and thanks. I've been a fool; I thought no one knew, but—I'm glad *you* do. . . "

CHAPTER XVII

I

THE next day passed without any further talk between Thorn and Aghassy, for at dawn Drake, a frightful vision in her *déshabillé*, waked Thorn with the news that Lady Mary was very ill. "Mrs. Aghassy told me to call you, My Lord," the woman added acidly, "though there's nothing you can do—Mr. Aghassy is a wonderful hand in a sick-room——"

Thorn, who had turned on the light, sat up in bed staring at her with the dazed feeling of a sound sleeper suddenly and unhappily wakened. "Mr. Aghassy," he murmured. "She won't like *that*—— I'll come at once, Drake," he added, pulling himself together, and she turned to the door, but he called her back.

"Has anyone telephoned for the doctor?"

"Yes, My Lord. Bruno did, half an hour ago. I believe Sir Arthur is on his way now——"

Thorn dressed quickly and went downstairs, cursing himself and Aghassy for their idiocy in quarrelling before a woman as ill and as old as his valorous aunt.

"I ought to have known—he'd never seen her really bad," he muttered, struggling to be fair to the man he hated.

He found order and quiet in Lady Mary's room, for even in illness the old woman could not endure confusion, or fussing. A fire burnt brightly on the hearth; one of the windows was wide open, the curtains drawn

back, the blind up; and Lily, very composed, though as pale as a linen cloth, sat by the bed, holding her mother-in-law's hand, which she was stroking gently.

Lady Mary, looking incredibly old and very little, had been propped high up against the pillows, and lay with her eyes shut, her lips, bluish and pinched, slightly parted. She breathed faintly and with an unconscious effort, and when she heard Thorn come in she looked at him and tried to smile, and whispered something about being a tiresome old thing.

"She's all right now, Lily said gently, "but I knew you'd want to come down. . . ."

He nodded. "Shall I go and make you some coffee?" he asked, anxious to get out of the room where Aghassy, fully dressed, but wearing an old velvet jacket, was sitting.

"Oh yes, do. . . ."

As he left the room he found to his surprise and annoyance that Aghassy had followed him.

"Look here, Thorn—beg pardon, I haven't got used to your new name yet—she is very ill, the old lady, and I fear it was our fault, yours and mine."

Thorn nodded impatiently. "Yes, but that can't be helped now. . . ."

Aghassy eyed him as if something in him was at once strange and interesting. "Of course it can't, but she mustn't be worried again. We must make a—what d'you call it?—a truce. I'll agree to anything you like about Jimmy. . . ."

Thorn looked at him coldly. "Until she's better, you mean! I'm a bad liar, but she certainly must have peace of mind for a few days."

Aghassy laughed. "I'm a fairly decent liar, and as you suggest, I'll do the talking." Suddenly his face changed and softened, and he went on in another voice: "She's a magnificent old woman, Thorn, and whether you believe it or not, I—I *like* her!"

He spoke the truth, and Thorn knew it. "I believe it," he answered grudgingly, for he was not so pliable as his enemy, and could not change his moods so easily.

"But if you like her you might behave decently about the boy. She adored Dampierre, Jim's father, and it's *him* more than the scene last night that is killing her——"

Aghassy shrugged his shoulders, all the softness gone out of his face. "We can discuss Jim later," he answered. "For the time being you and I are to pretend that—that you don't long to murder me, and that I'm not sick with boredom at the sight of you. . . ."

Without answering him, Thorn went on to the dining-room and set about making the coffee. As he did so he suddenly remembered the morning five years ago when he found the young Jim and Picotee "killing the worm," and discussing their mother's engagement.

As the memory of Jimmy's child-face came back to him with the distinctness common to highly nervous conditions, he caught himself groaning aloud. Dear little crooked-smiling Jinks, what a funny, dear little chap he had been and now—— "Bruno," he burst out, as the old man came in bringing milk and toast on a tray, "I wish to God I had died before the Signora Lili married again——"

Bruno, who looked very sallow and old after his

alarm, set down the tray. "Ah, Signor Carlo," he answered, quite forgetting his manners, "why didn't you ask her first?"

Charles, too, forgot his manners—and other things. "She wouldn't have had me," he murmured, tacitly admitting it all.

"Ah, yes, The Signorina Lili would have said yes, in those days, to anyone who—who really *wanted* her. There are women," the old philosopher went on dreamily, standing there with his eyes fixed on space, "who want to love—*chi vogliono amare*; and others who—who need to be loved——"

After this highly out-of-place speech the two men came to their daylight senses, and Bruno, who of late had begun to walk as very old men walk, hardly lifting his feet from the ground, shuffled away to his secret regions behind green baize doors.

Thorn went on making his coffee, and, when it was ready, arranged Lady Mary's tray, with its beautiful brass accoutrements, and carried it to her room. Aghassy still sat by the fire; Lily still sat by the bed; Drake, in her element, her demeanour, Thorn, who detested her, had to admit, not only excusing but justifying her position in the household, standing near the invalid. Near her stood a small, slight man with darting, light brown eyes and a sensitive mouth: Sir Arthur Hesketh of Harley Street.

"Hullo, Charles! what have you got there? Oh, coffee!" The great little man sniffed audibly. "It is coffee! I hope you have a cup for me?"

A few moments later Doctor Hesketh and Charles

Thorn stood at the door of the conservatory, taking leave of each other.

"What *started* it?" Hesketh asked.

"A row. My fault—mine and Aghassy's——"

Hesketh nodded. "I see. Now look *herē*, Charles," the little baronet went on forcefully, "I'll tell you this much straight. Lady Mary hasn't long to live under the best of conditions, and if you and that—that beastly bounder—quarrel before her she won't live a month!"

Never had Thorn so liked the tyrannical little man as he did now, on hearing him call Aghassy a bounder.

"We're not going to quarrel, Hesketh. To do the fellow justice it was *he* who suggested a truce till she is better——"

Hesketh nodded. "Good! It doesn't matter who suggested it, but there must be peace, or Mary Dampierre will die. That's all. Now you know." And he took his leave.

II

It was not so much Lady Mary's bodily weakness, though that was very great, as her exhaustion of will, that so alarmed those who loved her. For three days she lay there, limp and indifferent, the very ghost of her voluntary, vivid self, and so strong was her influence, even now in its suspension, that like the beasts in the fable the two men who hated each other so intensely lay down, as the saying goes, like the lion and the lamb, together.

Aghassy's peculiar, incongruous passion for making little gifts expressed itself, during those days, in a

series of offerings of flowers, and never were flowers chosen with greater taste and discrimination. Once he brought in two deep orange-coloured roses in a small, straight, rock-crystal vase that had cost many pounds, but might, so far as Lily and Charles knew, have cost a shilling. Once he brought a great sheaf of white lilacs; and another day he sent, through Jimmy, with his love, a handful of lilies of the valley. His anxiety about the old lady, being perfectly sincere, could not fail to touch his wife, and Thorn knew, with a pang, that she was sorry for her outburst to him in her room that night. Jacques, after all, was very kind, he could see her thinking, and she had been very wicked to say what she had said!

She avoided Thorn whenever she could, and he knew that she was trying, in the piteous feminine way, to get back her lost faith in the man who was her husband. Lady Mary's illness, then, seemed for a time to be setting things right. Jimmy sat for hours in his grandmother's Corner, just outside the bedroom door—as good, his mother said, as a lamb. He did not smoke; his distressing little mannerisms disappeared; he seemed, though sad, younger and more English than he had been, and to everyone's relief Aghassy seemed delighted by the change.

But one afternoon Lady Mary, who for the last twenty-four hours had been better, and more able to notice what was going on round her, spoke to Thorn about Aghassy, who was in his room practising.

“Charles.”

“Yes, Aunt Mary——”

"Come here," the old lady went on, a little glow of fire in her spent eyes. "I'm as weak as a cat, and I wish to utter a word of wisdom——"

Charles bent over her, and she said, laughing weakly, pointing to the drawing-room door; "Jinks is there?"

He nodded.

"Jacques likes me, you know," she resumed after a pause. "He doesn't want to, but he can't help it, I'm so—so fascinating."

"You are, you wicked old woman!"

She chuckled. "Yes, that's what I am—a wicked old woman in a golden bed. I spiked his guns, though, *and* yours, you bloodthirsty fellow, by nearly dying, didn't I?"

"You did. You scared the life out of all of us."

"Charles." She was suddenly grave, and he took her hand and looked seriously down at her. "Charles, you mustn't let him fool you."

"I don't mean to," he returned grimly.

"Good. He's full of brains, you know; more brains than Lily and you and me together."

He nodded, and after a pause she went on, speaking with difficulty, but eagerly, and considering each word before she uttered it:

"It's the money, you know, that he wants. He means to get Jimmy completely—under his thumb. If Jimmy was not going to be rich, he would let him alone——"

"Yes."

"I could leave my money away from Jimmy, but—I can't touch your uncle's, and poor Jim's——"

After a pause she resumed: "Charles, as soon as I'm well, you and he will be at it hammer and tongs—I know that——"

"So do I!"

"And if it wouldn't endanger your neck, I'd be glad to hold the candle while you murdered him——"

"I only wish you *would*, Aunt Mary!"

"But cunning is the only thing we can use against him. Cunning. And you have about as much of that as—as a Bath bun."

"Hesketh has told him, *before me and Lily*—I made him—that the boy will die if he doesn't lead a perfectly regular, quiet life——"

The old woman seemed unimpressed by this information. "Of course. And of course Jacques knows that you told him to say it! Oh, my poor Charles!" After a minutes she went on: "Has he said anything to you about Arthur Hesketh's advice?"

"No, not a word; I've hardly seen him, you know."

Lady Mary lay staring at the hangings. "I could shake Lily when I think that it was she who refused to let the boy go to school just after their marriage. What a mess she's got us all into!"

Thorn nodded. "Yes, but that's spilt milk. Hesketh says that considering his height, and the irregular way he's evidently been living, Jimmy's health is not so bad as he would have expected; but the Lord knows it's bad enough, and Hesketh is as anxious as we are to get him somewhere where the hours are regular, and so on."

Lady Mary nodded. "You may not know it," she

said, "but Jimmy smells a rat. He told me this morning that he knew you were trying to bully Jacques—'poor Jacques,' he called him—into sending him to school. Jacques has managed to put his back up against you, Charles!"

"I thought he had, but that doesn't matter. Lily is much happier about him, and it seems that Aghassy *has* been taking great care of his health. He bought him all kinds of wonderful American underclothes, and a fur-lined coat, and he's taken quarts of medicine—tonics and things that Jacques got for him——"

Lady Mary made an impatient gesture. "Nonsense, my dear! don't you be fooled by *that* kind of thing. If he had kept the boy shut up in a box of cotton-wool, the condition he's in now would only prove that a box of cotton-wool is bad for him! Keep your eye on the main fact that Jimmy is in a very dangerous state, and the fault is Jacques's. What we have got to do, by hook or crook—and I wish we were better equipped for the crook side of it—is to get him away at once, out of Jacques's hands. He adores Jacques, and it will be a hard tussle; but we can do it if we don't waste time, and, above all, if you and Lily don't waste your energy and strength in trying to be strictly just to Jacques, who doesn't care a button for justice or anything else, except getting his own way!"

Thorn nodded, "You're right there, but at the same time one must be fair, and personally I'm always more comfortable for giving the devil his due."

"I know you are, and like many very nice people you mistake comfort for a sense of equity, which is

ridiculous. Now I am quite aware," she went on, "that you think you are being very wise in putting off this question of Jimmy until I'm well again, and that is exactly where you're wrong. So far as Jacques goes I am at my very strongest when I'm ill, and the weaker the better! So I mean to have it out with him this very afternoon, and I want you to go off somewhere, and stay away for several hours. There's going to be no nonsense about abstract justice in this business, and I mean to run it *myself*.

"I don't care a straw what Arthur Hesketh said. Suppose I do die a month or two earlier than I need, that's my business, and it would be well worth while if, through doing it, I can save Jimmy. Because that's what it comes to."

III

Thorn wasted no time in arguing with her, and, after a word of warning to Bruno, did as he was told, and betook himself to the Zoo, a place for which he had a strange liking, and the society of whose various inhabitants sometimes seemed to him more comforting, in their single-mindedness and frankness of purpose, than that of a community of human beings. As he stood looking at the greatest of the lions there was relief to him in the thought that the beast was saying in its own language: "What I should like to do better than anything in the world, and what, if I could, I should do without any temporizing, is to claw you to death, and eat the tenderest parts, and leave your clothes and your bones to the vultures." This seemed to him a much more gentlemanly standpoint than Aghassy's,

for instance, for Aghassy, with all his extraordinary cleverness, was full of deceit and guile, although Thorn knew that he, too, would have liked to crunch his bones.

. . . He strolled away to where the lynx dwelt in solitary splendour. Lady Mary had once said to him that Aghassy's eyes were like those of the lynx, and it seemed to Charles now that the creature's whole face and expression resembled those of his enemy. The queerly flattened head of the caged animal really reminded him strangely of Aghassy's, and he turned away from it hastily, just as he always turned from the man.

In the snake-house he found a little party of three watching the great constrictors in their glass cases; a fat, good-tempered looking man, a handsome woman of markedly fine carriage, and a little boy in Highland kit—a little boy about six or seven. The child was delighted with a certain huge, evil-looking captive, and kept calling to the other two to admire his favourite. "Aoh, Mummy," he cried, "here's a beauty!" But the tall woman and the man were talking earnestly together, and took no heed of him. The child, evidently spoilt, and used to a good deal of attention, showed resentment at this neglect by standing on ~~one~~ leg and twisting the other leg round it, and writhing with hunched shoulders, while he called fretfully: "Uncle Wolf, Uncle Wolf, stop talking, and come and lift me up. I want to see these ones here!"

As the child spoke, Thorn got a glimpse of the mother's face, and saw that she was too deeply immersed in trouble of some kind even to hear the dis-

agreeable little Cockney voice; so he bent down to the child, and swung him up so that he could look down through the glass where two beautiful puce-coloured gentlemen from Africa lay staring up, with odious dull eyes.

"Here you are," he said to the youngster. "How would you like to have one of these for a pet?"

The little boy laughed, showing a gap where two of his front teeth had been. "I've got a dog," he said, "and a cat, and Uncle Wolf gave me a canary. Have you got a canary?"

Thorn set him down and led him away towards the far end of the room. Even in the snake-house at the Zoo he found human trouble and friction; but he was fond of children, and the little boy, consoled by his attention, prattled on in a not unattractive way. As they came back and neared the child's mother and uncle, whom from something in their manner to each other Thorn acquitted of any blood-relationship, he heard the woman say dolorously: "You would think he would be satisfied with a nice wife like that, and all the money, wouldn't yer; and besides, it isn't as if he cared for me any more; but I tell you, Wolf, that it was *awful* when I told him—about you—I mean. He won't let me, and you will just have to give it up——"

She looked at her wrist-watch and held out her hand. "I must go now; he will be popping in this afternoon, just to make sure you're not there." Turning, she added in a very pleasant voice to the child: "Come along, Theodore, we must go. Daddy's coming."

Thorn knew then that she must be the Mrs. Cuthbertson of whom Bruno had told him. The coincidence didn't strike him as very strange, for everything seemed improbable, almost unusual, to him now-a-days; but when the woman and the child had gone, after her nervously enjoining the man to stay where he was just in case "he" might have tracked them there, Thorn approached the other man, who stood despondently gazing down at the collection of rattlesnakes, his heavy, kind, common face full of worry.

"Excuse me for speaking to you," Thorn began, "but I happen to know who that lady is, and I am a cousin of Mr. Aghassy's wife——"

After a moment, during which he learned that his companion's name was Piper, and that Mr. Piper was now more convinced than ever of the truth of the saying about fact being stranger than fiction, the two men walked away together, leaving the reptiles to their dreams of freedom, and went slowly towards the entrance gate.

"You will forgive my saying that I know from my aunt, Lady Mary Dampierre, that Mrs. Cuthbertson will be glad to marry you if Aghassy would let her——"

Mr. Piper groaned. "Oh, not at all," he murmured vaguely, referring to Thorn's apology. "That woman's an angel. What she's put up with from Aghassy no words can tell, and as long as she cared for him, or even while he seemed fond of her, *I* never said a word! He's a great man, and I'm only a plain city chap, and I know the difference; but it's years now

since he openly deserted her—not that he had ever been really faithful—and the way he's treated little Theo is perfectly scandalous. But once he had married he ought to have let her settle down with me. I'd have taken care of her, and she's a woman that needs to be taken care of."

Charles nodded. "They all need it in one way or another," he said, feeling very friendly towards Mr. Wolf Piper, who was plainly an honourable, decent man. "Do you mean to tell me that Aghassy flatly refuses to let her marry you even now?"

Mr. Piper looked at him shrewdly. "Can you imagine him flatly refusing anything? Not him! He just won't let her. It's his will and his manner that does it. I think I can say that she hates him now, and yet, damn him, he can always get round her when he chooses."

Thorn shuddered. This was probably the key to one of the many puzzles at Yellowleaf: Aghassy knew how to get round Lily with his manner and his will-power.

"The man is a brute," he declared angrily.

And Mr. Piper agreed with him in a way that brought these two Englishmen, so unlike each other in almost everything, very close to each other for a moment.

"My aunt's butler, the charming old Italian about whom Mrs. Cuthbertson will have told you, told me one very dreadful thing about the fellow," Thorn began again presently—"the way he makes Mrs. Cuthbertson suffer through—through—how shall I put it?"

"Through destroying her self-respect," the other man finished for him. "Yes, I've seen her nearer suicide than I ever want to see anyone again, from what he's said to her, and she as good a woman as ever lived, except just for being what she has been with him."

"I'm sure of it," agreed Thorn truthfully. "But she must know this, she must understand——"

Mr. Piper sighed, his red face losing a little of its colour. "You see, she used to believe him to be an angel, or a hero; and then his way of torturing her was——" He broke off, and his impotent distress was very painful to see.

"Go on," said Thorn gently. They were alone in the middle of the broad gravel path, and poor Mrs. Cuthbertson's suitor stood still.

"Why, don't you see?" he said, "the fellow let her see him *exactly as he really is*, and it's awful. I believe he got a kind of pleasure in forcing her to know what a bestial, degraded animal she had—loved. And he made her ashamed—by God, he made her feel unfit to live! Why, do you know, I've seen that poor woman crying on the floor, with the blinds down, because she was ashamed to see the sun——"

They walked on in silence for a moment and then, suddenly noticing his companion's face and stopping again, Mr. Piper took out his handkerchief and wiped his forehead and face, and neck.

"Oh, *you* feel that way, too?" he said. "You would like to kill him! *I've* been pretty near trying to do him in once or twice. He's not fit to live, anyhow.

and there I've been having to look on for years at his having this 'orrible effect on the woman I'd—I'd gladly die for any day." He paused, and Thorn drew a deep breath and spoke with an effort.

"It must be hell." He held out his hand. "I'll leave you now, Mr. Piper," he said. "And I thank you for trusting me. I'm going to try and help you and Mrs. Cuthbertson. It's just possible that I may be able to——"

Mr. Piper's overcoat was the wrong shade of brown, and he wore a made-up tie, but the bond of common hate is very strong, and Thorn shook hands with him warmly. "Here's my card," he said, "and if ever I can do anything, you may be sure I will," and he walked on alone, raging with horror over what the man had told him. The hideous cynicism of Aghassy's treatment of the mother of his son made him feel almost physically sick, and when he reached the house, he did what was to him a most unusual thing; he went upstairs and took a stiff brandy-and-soda before he dared face Aghassy.

CHAPTER XVIII

I

As he went down from his room Charles met Lily, who was coming upstairs, her arms full of long-stemmed, enormous pink roses. There must have been three or four dozen of them, and across their buoyant foliage looked up at him Lily's face white with excitement but full of triumph and joy.

"Oh, Charles," she cried, "it's all right—about Jimmy, I mean. Jacques has been *so* kind! I—I told you he was kind, *really*," she added, arrested in full flight of oratory by the look in his face, "and he is! Mamma and he have had a talk, and he agreed to do whatever she and you decided was best for Jinks. He said that he is afraid he *did* spoil him—he always *was* fond of him, you know—and that it was only fair that you should have a try now. Oh, Charles, isn't it splendid!"

Thorn was silent for a moment, for in his ears were echoing poor Mr. Piper's words about Aghassy—"He gets round her by his will and his manner——"

Aghassy was getting round *him*, now. Lady Mary, and Lily, and he, Charles Thorn, were being managed by this clever scoundrel; and by this unexpected submission he had beaten them.

"Aren't you *glad*?" Lily faltered, and suddenly her eyes filled with tears, to his horror and fright, and he bent over the roses, which he hated because he knew

where they had come from, and made a feint of smelling them. Her little face was so dear, so dear to him, and her illusory happiness so pathetic, that he felt real, physical pain in his heart.

He feared that she might force him to speak, but she did not; there was a long silence there on the shallow oak stairs, the melancholy autumn sun looking in through the big window, the old clock ticking loud.

When he looked up, Thorn's odd sense of fear grew stronger, for in Lily's dark blue eyes he saw a new, perilous understanding.

"Charles," she said gravely, "you don't believe in it; you don't trust him, and—it's my fault. I have been afraid of him, sometimes, and you know it, and it has made you afraid—for me. Isn't that true?"

He could not admit it, and he could not lie to her, but all the misery in his heart looked out at her from his eyes, and she went on: "You make me ashamed. I have been a—a coward. It's because he is so *strong*, Charles. He's different from everybody in the whole world. He's never nervous, never—fanciful, like *us*—he's never afraid of himself. And he is fierce, and that," she added, "used to frighten me."

The scent of her great armful of roses mounted like that of burning incense as they stood there. Thorn thought vaguely of those pent-up reptiles at the Zoo; of the honest lion who had wanted to devour him; of the flat-headed lynx——

Her soft voice went on for a moment without carrying any meaning to his ears. The only clear idea he had now was that Aghassy, in his immense power, was

a thing so evil that he should be put to death. He had shamed and driven to despair that poor woman who had borne him a son; and if he went on living, what to prevent his opening his black soul to this poor child whom he, Charles Thorn, loved, and killing her with horror?

Then suddenly Charles Thorn sat down on the stairs and buried his self-betraying face in his hands, for the thought had come to him that if Lily and Aghassy should have a child—a son—he might grow up like his father. Lily's son and that monster's! Thorn felt that rather than allow such a thing to happen he could kill Aghassy——

A rain of strong-stemmed, strong-scented roses roused him, for in her fright Lily had let them fall, and a sharp thorn caught Charles's cheek and clung to it for a second, drawing blood before it slithered to his knees.

"Charles, *dear* Charles——" He heard her dear voice, he felt her dear hands tugging at his, he could hear her breathing.

"You don't believe it," she cried, "and it's *my* fault."

That seemed to be her chief trouble: that it was owing to her weakness that night in the garden, when Aghassy's telegram had come, that he doubted Aghassy's good faith now.

Thorn dropped his hands from his ravaged face. "My dear," he answered gently, "you—you've misunderstood me. I've felt seedy all day, and—that's all."

He rose, and stood looking down at her as she stood among the fallen roses. "I'm very glad—of course—about Aghassy. It was—very decent of him. Now"—for he had come to the end of his strength—"I must go down to Aunt Mary."

Hitherto she had always believed every word he said; now he knew that she did not believe him, and knew that she was right in not believing him. As he went on downstairs he cursed Aghassy in a new way. To his other horrors Aghassy had added this one; he was forcing him, Charles Thorn, to lie.

II

Late that evening Thorn and Lady Mary had a second talk. Their first, following immediately on Thorn's meeting with Lily on the stairs, had been unsatisfactory because Thorn, under the influence of his interview with Piper and his talk with Lily, was afraid to give rein to his thoughts, and had remained, to the old lady's annoyance, almost silent in the face of her eloquence.

Her leading motif was her absolute distrust in Aghassy's good intentions. "He has something up his sleeve," she said, over and over and over again—"something up his sleeve that will beat us yet."

But when Aghassy, as Thorn knew through Bruno, had gone out, and eleven o'clock had struck, Thorn and Lady Mary had their second consultation, and the air cleared a little.

"If he's said it he can't go back from it," Thorn declared, firmness coming to him, as it often does, with

the uttering of bold words. "Hesketh is coming early to-morrow—I've 'phoned him—and he will clinch things. We'll have the boy out of the house in a week's time, and then——"

"And then, and then, and then," snapped the old woman fiercely. "Oh, you—you unbounded idiot!"

The ferocity worn out of him by its own strength during the day, Thorn laughed mournfully. "Am I an unbounded idiot, Aunt Mary? No doubt. I'm tired out to-night. I—I'm just a man"—and he told his odd adventure in the snake-house.

"Isn't it horrible?" he finished by saying.

Her face was white and fixed; he knew that she shared fully his repulsion and anger.

"Aunt Mary," he said slowly, "there are moments when—when I feel that it wouldn't be wrong if—if I killed the fellow. Suppose he did that to Lily? Told her—let her see—what he really is—what kind of man *she* has—has, well, believed in! It would kill her. It would be like—like lifting the lid off Hell and making her look in. *Her!*"

He rose and prowled about restlessly. "He—he ought to be dead," he ended, with abruptness, after a pause.

Lady Mary sat up suddenly. "Charles," she burst out, "don't you be more of a fool than is necessary! I'll not have you killing people, if you don't mind."

He turned and looked at her, heavy-eyed and haggard.

"I beg your pardon, Aunt Mary—I'm an idiot, and—well, I'm an idiot, that's all. Of course I don't

mean to commit murder, but——” he paused, and then went on impressively: “God help me, I *do* wish he was dead.”

Lady Mary eyed him for a moment, and then said, her words coming slowly: “The world would be much better without him, and I, too, wish——” She broke off, adding after a pause, with a laugh: “we are both of us thoroughly hysterical, my dear boy. Doesn’t it just show what a *magerful* creature Jacques is, to turn you and me into two such idiots!”

After a few minutes they parted, Charles having promised to set to work in the morning to find a good crammer for Jimmy.

“Mind you,” Lady Mary added, as he kissed her good-night, “*ostensibly* we’ve got him safe enough. He has promised to do whatever you and I decide, and you and I have decided to get Jimmy out of this at once, so he can’t oppose us in any *open* way. We could beat him any day in the open; its what he will do in the dark, secretly, that I’m in dread of——”

Again cursing Aghassy’s black power, by which he had forced him, Charles Thorn, to lie to the woman he loved, Charles assumed a confidence he did not feel, and bullied his facial muscles into the travesty of a smile. “Don’t you worry, dear,” he answered gently, “he *can’t* go back on his word, and it is all going to be all right——”

Her sunken dark eyes rested heavily on his for a moment. “Good-night, Charles. Anyhow, whatever he may try to do, we will *fight*, won’t we?”

And Thorn answered, more grimly than he knew: “*We will!*”

III

"No," the young James Geoffrey Dampierre declared gently, but with a new, derivative firmness, "I will not go to school, and I will not go to a crammer's."

His mother implored, and wept, and remonstrated; his cousin Charles lost his famous temper and stormed at him, using unjustifiable and powerless language; his grandmother presented to his youthful mind cogent and unwounding reasons for a change of air and surroundings. "Major Meege is a delightful man," she told him, "an old Indian Cavalry man, not a bit like the usual—er—tutor. Besides, he is a good rider, and I was intending to give you a couple of good—really good—hunters, so that you'd have a fine winter——"

"I'm not going, Grandmamma." Jimmy's chin was still rather vague in outline, his pale lips a little lax, but his voice, as he sat there in the sunshine by his grandmother's bed, was full of firmness. "Very kind of you, but—I prefer Yellowleaf."

"Sir Arthur thinks——"

"Sir Arthur may go to the deuce," Jimmy declared calmly. "Charles has been after him, and I don't choose to be bossed by Charles."

By a great effort the old lady was silent for a moment. Then she said, smiling—full, God help her, she felt, with slyness and iniquity: "Poor Charles does *not* want you to be away, Jinks! Charles loves you, and his one idea was to coach you, and study with you——"

Jimmy laughed, his mouth curling up in an ugly way. "Old Gian de Medici knows how to manage *you* all right, Gran!"

A sound spanking was the treatment Lady Mary would have liked to offer him at that moment; her delicate fingers tingled with the lust of chastisement. But she had made up her mind to meet cunning with cunning. "My good child," she remarked, her old eyes gleaming, "even Jacques thinks it would be good for you to go, if only for three or four months, to Major Meege!"

Jim, at his most unpleasant that afternoon, shrugged his shoulders. "You don't know Jacques—that's the whole point, Grandmamma. It nearly kills him to be tiresome and—and—authorit—authoritative. His one idea is that everybody ought to be let alone—to be happy. Poor old Jacques. I know! He's *pretending* to want me to go to this Megee person, because *you* want me to!"

"Oh, is he!" For the life of her, the old woman could not keep the dryness out of her voice, and as it reached his ears the boy looked at her. "Yes, he *is*. Jacques is the kindest, dearest fellow in the world; he can't bear to see anyone unhappy. Oh," he rose impatiently and stood by the fire, "it's all that old duffer Charles's fault, and Mother's! They would like me to be a baby all my life, and because I'm not, because I've had the luck to see a bit of life with the finest chap that ever stepped, the—Charles, at least—is *jealous*. That's the whole thing!"

Lady Mary eyed him angrily, her hot temper rising. "Oh, indeed! And when, may I ask, did the kindest, dearest fellow in the world fill you up with all this wisdom?"

A brief, heated argument followed, at the end of which Jimmy begged his grandmother's pardon, all his real, childish love for her bubbling up in him at the sight of her lying exhausted, fighting for breath, on her pillows.

"I'm *awful* sorry, Gran," he cried, his acquired mannerisms vanishing like bubbles pricked. "Everything'd be all right if it wasn't for that ass Charles!"

Lady Mary, panting, more extenuate than was strictly necessary, shook her head sadly. "Oh, Charles," she murmured; "my dear Jinks, it isn't *Charles* who matters! It's *me*—I—who feel that you need a change! So does Jim, mother; and so does Arthur Hesketh, who brought you into the world——"

But her specious phrasing failed! Jimmy was sincerely anxious about her health, and he loved his mother, but to school or a tutor he would not go. "Of course, Charles thinks it's Jacques's fault," the boy declared with ferocity, "but it isn't. Jacques says he thinks I *ought* to go, and that Charles will stop upsetting Mother about me. Jacques says I've been a silly young ass, and I *have*, of course, but it's not his fault!"

Lady Mary remarked softly, at this point, that Aghassy did not like Charles Thorn, and therefore misunderstood him. Jimmy laughed, with a tolerance that struck his hearer as both foolish and offensive. "There you are! I tell you dear old Jacques *doesn't* dislike Charles! He sees, of course, what a dull, insular fellow he is, but he—he thoroughly respects him. *Thoroughly!*"

He was so plainly echoing Aghassy's words that

Lady Mary could have groaned aloud in her helpless admiration for Aghassy's cleverness; but she, too, was clever, so she made no sign. After a while she remarked drily: "Well, Jinks, you are a minor, you know, and we could force you to do what we think best; but—I for one should not try to force you. Stay on here if you like!"

The boy was too young, for all his unconsciously received coaching, to hide his surprise at this sudden descent.

"Why, Gran!" he began eagerly.

But the old lady burrowed into her pillows and shut her eyes. "Please go away now," she said faintly; "I—I'm tired. I—I suppose you're too wise and independent to take cod-liver oil to please me—not Charles, but *me*?"

The boy was touched. "Oh, Gran, what a beast you must think me! Of *course* I will. And—you'll see—I shall be all right," he added earnestly. "I'm going to work at my painting. Jacques says I have real talent—— Oh, Grandmamma, *please* don't look like that!" He bent and kissed her gently, and feeling an old reprobate of the deepest dye, she pretended to be too feeble to open her eyes.

"Gran," he added eagerly, "*please* don't worry! I—I'll go out *now*, and get a bottle of cod-liver oil."

CHAPTER XIX

I

WHEN Christmas holiday-time came, the question of Jim's immediate future was tacitly dropped, for there was, everyone felt, no good in crossing the river—and a stormy, torrential river it promised to be—before actually reaching it. Lady Mary, once more established in her Corner, was much better, and Thorn spent most of his days in reading to her, for she was yet too weak to work at her embroidery, and reading tired her eyes.

So Jimmy's period of rebellion was ever afterward remembered by him with a background of horrible, depressing Greek drama. "Murderous lot they are," he observed one afternoon when on a quest for tea. "A good thing people don't go in for that kind of thing nowadays, or I might up and slay you, Grand-mamma, or Charles, for wanting me to go to school; or Charles might run a knife into Jacques for *not* wanting me to!" Charles started, his face changing oddly. Christmas was over, and the period of the truce nearly at an end. "Or Jacques might treat you to a poisoned beaker, smother your mother, and enjoy your fortune at his leisure," Lady Mary added, smiling in a grim way. "Your sudden removal, my dear Jinks, would be more beneficial to Jacques than his to any of us, or Charles's would to you——"

Jim laughed, too. He looked ill and nervous, and

his grandmother knew that he had gone to a play and a studio party the night before, with some people he had met on the P. and O. on the way from Australia. "Oh, well, *I* couldn't read those gloomy old plays, anyhow—all that rot about it's being *right* for Orestes to kill what's-his-name—his stepfather—and his mother! They were such bores, all of 'em, that they deserved to be killed; but murder's murder, ain't it, Charles?"

Of late he had shown a disposition to please Thorn, less, however, as if he regretted his anger against him, than as if he wished to win a powerful, but not particularly implacable, adversary over to his side. Thorn felt sure that Aghassy had advised this attitude, and he naturally revolted, and refused to respond to it.

"Of course murder's murder," Charles answered now, his grim face not relaxing. "but some murders are certainly more justifiable than others——"

As he spoke Aghassy came in with some books he had brought for the old lady, and joined in the talk. "Who's going to murder whom?" he asked, smiling and sitting down. "I've got the Gogol book, Lady Mary, and the poems, and they are going to send to the publisher for the others——"

"Thanks, Jacques. Jinks is cursing the Greek dramatists, and Charles is defending murder as a means of justice——"

Aghassy glanced at Thorn and then at the old lady. "Some murders have always seemed to me less horrible than certain other crimes——"

"Yes." Thorn's deep voice held a note that drew their attention, and no one spoke till he went on. "The

worst crimes of all," he said slowly, "have no names—they are things that hurt souls, and men who commit them deserve death far more than some poor devil who is injured, or jealous, or dishonoured, and loses his head and runs a knife into his enemy——"

"I hope," Aghassy exclaimed with a pleasant laugh, "that you don't mean *me*, for having let Jim outgrow his strength and smoke too many cigarettes!"

At the back of his strong anger at this stab, Thorn was conscious of a feeling of admiration for his adversary's amazing powers of dissimulation. No one, not the shrewdest observer alive, could have seen by his manner that a declared hatred of Thorn was behind his assumption of desultory teasing. He was carrying out the truce magnificently, and Thorn chafed at the consciousness of his inferiority at pretence; he knew that his hatred gleamed in his eyes and was cutting lines in his face, and he knew that Aghassy despised him for his lack of self-control.

It was Jimmy who answered his stepfather's jesting remark. "Oh no, Jacques; we were talking about that chap in Æschylus who murdered his mother because she married again and he didn't like her husband——"

"Worse and worse, Jinko! Just supposing that you didn't like me! If you had Thorn's—principles—my life wouldn't be worth a rotten fig!"

"Rubbish, Jacques!" Lady Mary cried. "Lily didn't murder her first husband to marry you, and she is altogether unlike Clytemnestra, so the comparison doesn't hold water. Go and play that Debussy

thing about rain to me. I'm an aged and afflicted woman and need pampering!"

Aghassy obeyed her with his usual grace, and for a long time the pattering of the musical rain filled the room, and no one spoke. It was, finally, Lily who broke the silence by coming in with an open letter in her hand. "Here's a letter from Brandon Roper," she said to Jimmy. "He's going for the winter and spring to a place near Bordeaux with two boys—young men, I mean—to prepare them for the Oxford exams. They are both behind in their studies, one," she glanced at the letter, "because he has been living in Ceylon, and only just come into the fortune that brings him home; and the other is a Spaniard, the duque—I suppose that's a duke—di Alvarique."

Jim laughed. "Hope he'll enjoy Bordeaux," he answered. "*I* shan't, because I'm not going there——"

She looked distressed. "Darling Jinksy, don't be a pig," she pleaded: "you heard Arthur Hesketh yesterday, what he said about your cough—and you know what a dear Mr. Roper is! You could ride, and walk——. You'd have a glorious time, and—and you know how pleased Jacques would be!"

The music was still going on; Aghassy was now playing Bach with a dignity and solemnity that in him always surprised Thorn. How could such a creature play with such reverence and splendour, he thought! As Lily stopped speaking Thorn knew that Aghassy was listening, and with a strong purpose he answered her. "Yes, Lily," he said; "Aghassy was saying again last night that he would really like Jim

to go to the South—he said he had quite changed his mind about it——”

The music stopped with a quiet chord, and the musician joined the group round the fire. “Let me see the letter, dearest,” he said to his wife, and no one spoke while he read it. When he had folded it and given it back to her he turned to his stepson. “Look here, young Jim,” he began seriously, “it’s quite true, I *do* think you had better do as your mother and grandmother wish. That is a very nice, understanding letter, and Roper won’t expect you to be a school-boy again; he knows you have travelled and know more than most boys of your age, and it would be more a question of your being in a decent climate than anything else, and you would—or, hang it all, you *ought* to—like those two fellows. I really think you’d better go.”

Jimmy stared at him in almost open-mouthed surprise. “Why, Jacques,” he exclaimed, plainly sincere, “you don’t *really* want me to go, do you?”

“I do, my boy.” Aghassy’s voice was the voice of a good, kind, wise father, and Lady Mary and Charles Thorn exchanged a quiet glance of resentful admiration, and the old lady clapped her hands softly to express her sense of the scene’s theatricality. “Bravo, le père noble,” she murmured.

Aghassy, like most insincere people, could stand anything better than being found out, and for a moment his astonishing composure tottered, and an irrepressible glare came into his green eyes; but he was too clever to notice the old lady’s manner, and went on in much the same tone: “At first, frankly, I *did not*

want you to go; but your grandmother and mother and—Charles ” (he knew Thorn hated him to call him Charles) “ have changed my mind. I now agree with them.”

Jim scowled in a puzzled way. “ I never knew *you* wobble before,” he grumbled; “ thought *you* knew your own mind——”

Aghassy laughed good-humouredly. “ I do, and when my mind changes I admit it, as a wise old fellow of my age ought to do. Well ”—he laid a hand on Jim’s shoulder and smiled over the lad’s head at his wife—“ let’s own up at once that the others were right, and you and I wrong, and let your mother write and make arrangements for you to go next week with Mr. Roper——”

“ All right,” the boy agreed, slowly and unwillingly. Then he added with a sudden change of manner: “ I say, Jacques, suppose I just *wouldn’t* go, could you *make* me? I’m nineteen and three months, you know——”

“ You’re a minor, and we are your guardians,” Aghassy returned. “ No doubt Thorn and I could force you legally; but I confess freely that if you were really dead against it—which, you know, you’re *not*—I should not feel justified in bullying you into it.”

“ I should,” put in Thorn grimly, and Aghassy nodded with satisfaction. “ No doubt you would, my dear fellow! You’re the bull-dog type of strong, authoritative Briton, and I——”

“ You are *not* a type of Briton. That is true!” Thorn’s loathing of the man had forced him into the

indiscretion, and he could have bitten his tongue out for saying it. Aghassy, however, only laughed. "No—I am only a poor, emotional, fluctuating music-man! Ah well, Thorn, all's well that ends well, and I've given in! You will admit," he added, holding out his broad, muscular hand palm upward, "that I'm at least a good loser!"

Thorn reluctantly shook hands with him, and he turned to Lady Mary. "Are you pleased with me, Lady Mary?" he asked, looking as if he were on the point of bowing to her.

"I shall be very glad indeed," the old woman answered brightly, smiling up into his face, "when Jim is in France with Brandon Roper. Roper is an excellent coach, and a gentleman, and he has also a fine sense of humour, so he will make Jinks very happy, which is what we all want——"

Aghassy watched her closely as she paused; it was plain that he was expecting her to say something more, but she did not, and after a moment he and his wife and Jimmy left the room together. "You might as well write to Roper at once," Aghassy remarked, as they reached the door, and Lily murmured a delighted "Yes."

"*Well?*" Lady Mary's voice was full of meaning, and Thorn started at it.

"Well?" he repeated vaguely, looking up.

The old woman leaned forward in her chair. "What do you make of *that*, now?" she asked; adding, without waiting for an answer: "Oh, Charles, Charles, get me my frame! I must think——"

II

Three days later Bruno came into Lady Mary's room while she was eating her lunch in bed, after a bad night and a visit from the doctor, and standing at the foot of the bed said respectfully in Italian: "There's a young female come, Eccellenza——"

Lady Mary, who loathed a lightly boiled egg and was eating one by the doctor's orders, laid down her spoon and looked up from the unseemly little mess in the decapitated shell in the egg-cup.

"A young female?" she repeated. "What on earth do you mean, Bruno?"

The old man, who looked very small and ancient in the bright winter light, rubbed his hands together. "Sissignora, a young lady who is to be the Signor Aghassy's secretary."

"The Signor Aghassy's secretary? You're mad, my poor old little old one, What should *he* do with a secretary?"

"She is to write his letters and help him with his Symphony, Eccellenza."

"Oh! His Symphony! I didn't know he was writing a Symphony!"

"No, Your Excellency, neither did I, and with respect speaking I don't think he is, *yet*——"

"Bruno, take this nasty egg away—throw it out of the window, and get me some cold ham—I cannot and will not eat raw eggs. And now you'll oblige me by telling me plainly, in straight words, exactly what you mean about this young female."

Bruno disposed of the offending egg by pouring its

contents into the grass under the window, and restored the empty shell for purposes of deception to the cup, before he answered. Then he used words in his own tongue which for plainness and downrightness could not be beaten. "I think, Your Excellency," he declared calmly, "that she is not a secretary; I think with respect speaking, that she is a harlot."

Lady Mary stared, then she burst into a peal of reprehensible but delighted laughter. "Thank you, Bruno," she cried; "you couldn't improve on that! But perhaps the lady is *both*—the one might easily include the other. However, tell me why you suspect her morals?"

He shrugged his shoulders deferentially. "Who knows why? A woman either is honest or she isn't, and there are signs——"

Lady Mary nodded. "No doubt. But, Bruno, you must be wrong. Even he wouldn't do that——" "He" always meant Aghassy between these two old friends, and there were no pretenses about him between them nowadays.

Bruno shrugged his shoulders again. "Eccellenza, the young woman is most certainly one—I thought I had better tell you."

After a moment he left the room bearing the tray, and Lady Mary lay back in her pillows, trying to get a light on the picture so unexpectedly presented to her.

III

Miss Pearl Maréchal, however, proved to be not only a private secretary, but a highly certified and

recommended one. Besides being, her papers proved, a wonder of rapidity and accuracy at shorthand and typing, she was a trained musician, learned in all the mysteries of thorough-bass and harmony, and fully qualified to help Aghassy in his projected Symphony.

It was Aghassy himself who explained the young lady to the old one, and he did it very well. There was no doubt at all that he had long been tinkering at his great work, for in a casual way he produced a huge sheaf of roughly written musical notes, which Jimmy, who happened to be in the room at the time, instantly remembered. "Ah, that's the largo you did that day in the harbour at Nagasaki, while we were coaling," the boy cried. "Oh, Jacques, I *am* glad you're really going to get to work on it at last!"

Lady Mary had great faith in Bruno's shrewdness, but when little Miss Maréchal was brought in to be introduced to her, she began to doubt it, for the girl was quiet-looking, and quietly dressed, and though her very white face was diversified by vividly rouged lips, the lips were no redder than those of many women of Lady Mary's own acquaintance. Her dark hair, ironed into waves such as were never seen on sea or land, was beautifully tidy; her small hands as white as snow, and well-kept, though not over manicured. Lady Mary could not imagine when Bruno had seen signs of her moral obliquity; after a day or two she told the old man rather sharply that he was an idiot, and had made an unjustifiable mistake in the matter.

"Eccellenza, many excuses, I *was* an idiot to say what I did," he answered respectfully; "but—I was right——"

Then Thorn, coming in late one night and having forgotten his latch-key, went round to the glass gallery door, on the chance of finding it open. The door was open, but he did not go in, for he saw through Aghassy's unshaded window a picture that kept him very quiet for a moment, then sent him noiselessly back to the front-door, where he rang.

It was Aghassy who let him in.

"Hullo, Charles, *you?* Lost your key?"

"No. Forgot to put it in my pocket when I changed, that's all. You are up late, Aghassy——"

He took off his coat and hung it up as he spoke, and Aghassy answered him: "By Jove! yes, it *is* late. After two! I've been working—on my Symphony—got started well, and forgot the time."

Despising himself for descending to such a ruse, yet too angry to care much what he did so long as he achieved his purpose, Thorn took out his cigarette-case and chose a cigarette. "Hard," he murmured, "on little Miss What's-her-name, isn't it, these late hours?"

Aghassy laughed. "Miss Maréschal? Oh, she went to bed hours ago," he answered easily.

Trembling with triumphant excitement, Thorn forced himself to light his cigarette, and then with a desperate kind of enjoyment he said in his quietest voice: "That's a damned lie. She's sitting on the table in your study drinking a whisky and soda at this moment!"

Aghassy drew back, amazement in his face, but not a sign of guilt or fear. "The devil she is! And how do *you* know?"

Thorn in a few words explained how he knew, and then waited for Aghassy to resent his insult. To his immense surprise, however, Aghassy did not resent it. Instead, he said gently: "Of course you think—things; but you're wrong. The girl is nothing to me. I've never even kissed her. I've never even had the slightest wish to do so——"

"Bosh!" The loathing and contempt in Thorn's ejaculation seemed to touch the other man far more keenly than being called a liar had done. His face changed, its Mongolian look growing stronger, his eyes shining in two tiny points like a wild beast's. "Damn you, Thorn, it's *true*. If you make any—any *profit* out of this with my wife, I'll break your neck——"

"What d'you mean by 'make profit'?"

They were speaking in an undertone for fear of being heard, and the intensity of their fury seemed heightened and made more dangerous by the softness of their voices. In the end Aghassy by an admirable effort of his will-power controlled himself and drew back. "You seem anxious to quarrel with me," he said slowly—"Ægisthus!"

Thorn laughed shortly, his hands plunged deep into his jacket pockets. "You do yourself too great honour! Agamemnon was an honourable man."

"And I am not!" Aghassy's face was really terrible in its feline-like ferocity. "Perhaps not. Oh, I know that you have been talking to that poor wretch, Wolf Piper—I know all about you. But in this particular matter—about little Miss Maréschal—you happen to be wrong, and if you make trouble for me about

her I—I'll force you to leave the house." After a pause he added, bending towards Thorn and positively whispering the words: "Who brought another man's wife a—prayer rug worth five hundred pounds at the very least!"

In the dark drawing-room sat, in her silently moving wheel-chair, the dying old woman to whom the house and all the money belonged; the old woman who loved the one man and hated the other.

Too restless to sleep, as she often was lately, Lady Mary had sat by the fire in her Corner until she fell into a heavy slumber. Drake was in her own room, in bed, but prepared to come to her mistress when she rang; but when Lady Mary woke it was not to ring for her maid, it was to hear the sound of voices in the hall. She listened, there all alone in the huge room; listened until she knew beyond a doubt to whom the angry voices belonged; then slowly, painfully, she propelled her chair, by its wheels, up the long room, noiselessly or so nearly noiselessly that the furious men did not hear her, and there she sat in the darkness by the open door, her worn-out old heart thumping furiously, her breath coming in great uneven pants——

* * * * *

"The prayer rug! So you knew its value!" Thorn said dully.

"Of course I did, you thick-brained fool! But that doesn't matter much. What does matter is—are you going to take my word about that girl?"

"No," Thorn's voice answered. "I'm not. The girl is a hussy, anyone can see that, and there she was,

at two o'clock in the morning, drinking in your room—her manner was perfectly unmistakable—of *course* I don't believe you——”

“She may be a hussy. To me personally she is simply a very capable musical secretary. I give you my word of honour to that.”

Thorn laughed in an undertone. “We'll finish this talk to-morrow,” he said. “You are lying, and I know it, and I can't stand any more lies to-night.”

* * * * *

Lady Mary, when Aghassy had gone back to his study, propelled herself back to the fire and rang for her maid. “I've been asleep, Drake,” she explained as the woman entered, arrayed in a grisly stone-grey garment. “I'll go to bed now.”

It was long, however, before she could sleep, for she knew, and somehow the conviction terrified rather than consoled her, that Charles had been wrong. Aghassy had told the truth about Miss Maréschal.

CHAPTER XX

I

AT seven o'clock the next morning Sir Arthur Hesketh was awakened, or as we beautifully say in England "woked," by a blow of the telephone that brought the, to him, alarming and distressing news that Lady Mary Dampierre had had a serious relapse, and seemed to be in the greatest danger. Arthur Hesketh had known this old lady for many years, and in a friendly way loved her very much. About twenty minutes past seven he was in his great car tearing through the wintry, deserted streets towards St. John's Wood, to find Yellowleaf in high confusion, and to learn from the agitated butler, who looked very odd through having forgotten in the stress of his early call to brush his hair, the reason of the distress. Bruno had, it appeared, been roused from a sound sleep in which he had been dreaming of the glass horns of Befana in Rome, when the terrified Drake had brought him downstairs, in a really disgraceful condition of undress, by her tearful and frantic account of his mistress's illness.

"She's dying, I tell you, Bruno," the woman had repeated over and over again. "Her mouth and chin is all purple, and I can't make her open her eyes."

"Signor dottore," the old man burst out, wringing his hands, "she's dying, I know she's dying, my beautiful dear lady. Come quickly. Come quickly and see her——"

Arthur Hesketh managed to save her, though only, as he afterwards admitted, by the skin of his teeth. It was plain to his trained eye that someone or something had distressed her almost to breaking-point, but there was no time for talk just then, and before eight o'clock Bruno, trembling with cold and misery like an ancient monkey, was pulling the night-bell of a famous chemist in Wigmore Street. The heavy-eyed young man who opened the door stared with amazement at the prescription the old man without a word held out to him. "This is pretty stiff," he remarked. "Will you just sit down?"

Bruno never forgot the five or six minutes that he sat there while the sleepy chemist made up the prescription. It was very still, and there was a strange smell of drugs, and the few lights brought only a feeble clarity to the great space, with its dividing and subdividing brown partitions.

When the young man, who was in his shirt-sleeves, came out with a wrapped-up bottle in his hands, Bruno murmured stupidly that he had no money with him; that it must go down on the account of Lady Mary Dampierre. The young man nodded kindly, and expressed a polite hope that the invalid might soon recover. "This," he added with a weak and drowsy jocularity, "will either kill or cure; it's what I call a real dose——"

Through the stark, still streets, bald and inhumanized at that early hour in this drowsy country, the old servant was borne back to his home, and as the car drew up outside the old green garden door that he

knew so well, he saw to his terror the flat, unlovely form of Drake arrayed in a sable cape of her old mistress's.

"Oh, Mr. Bruno, whatever has kept you so long?" the woman burst out as he reached her side. "Sir Arthur's a-pourin' brandy down her throat, but I don't believe she will ever be no better; and oh, I wish I hadn't been so cross last night—no, this morning it was—when she rang for me——"

* * * * *

Little Sir Arthur Hesketh, his face white, his hands cold, because, although the doctor he was also a friend, positively snatched the expected bottle from Bruno's hands. "Now then, Drake, two table-spoonfuls of water—not a drop more, not a drop less." He rose, held the phial up against the light, then, with a little shrug, turned to Aghassy, who was sitting as quiet as a statue in the corner. "Look here, Aghassy, you've got the soundest nerves of the lot. Pour out ten drops—you get out, Charles—mind you, Aghassy, ten drops, not nine, nor eleven; thirteen or fourteen would kill her——"

Lady Mary, who was quite unconscious, lay with her clear little profile outlined against the pillow. She seemed hardly to breathe, and there was a dreadful bluish tinge round her nose and mouth. Aghassy took the phial and the glass that Drake held out to him.

"Ten drops," he said quietly. "My hand is quite steady, Sir Arthur." Then he tilted the bottle and the dark drops fell slowly, measuredly, into the two

tablespoonfuls of water, colouring and darkening it. Hesketh took the glass from him and, kneeling by the dying woman, passed his left arm under her head and raised it slightly. His face was very white, but his voice was calm and strengthening as he leaned over. "Dear Mary," he said, "my dear Mary, we want you to drink this——"

They were all standing round the bed, each wrapped in a kind of garment of isolation and silence. Lily was there, her face tear-stained but calm; Thorn, looking like a broad, ugly mortuary statue; young Jimmy, his face distorted and blurred with crying; Drake, red about the eyelids and shaky about the lower jaw; and, near the window on his knees, a shabby, little, worn rosary in his old hands, old Bruno knelt, the morning air stirring his curly, unbrushed hair.

"Mary." Doctor Hesketh's voice seemed to have a curious quality of penetration, and the sinking old woman opened her dim eyes and looked at him with a kind of struggle for recognition.

"Yes, it's me," he said. "It's Arthur. Just drink this, my dear," the old man said to the old woman, "there's a good girl——"

And as she drank, kindly obedient, the old Italian's voice was heard, and what he was saying was this:

"Ora pro nobis, nunc et in hora mortis nostræ!"

II

It was plainly very much to Sir Arthur Hesketh's surprise that Lady Mary ever rallied from her alarming illness. When, two or three days later, he met

Thorn in the drawing-room as he left his patient an hour or two after dinner, the two men walked together up towards the hall-door.

"Is she better?" Thorn asked in a low voice.

Hesketh nodded. "Yes. She'll pull through this time, but she can't possibly live if she has another such an attack. Her constitution is marvellous—marvellous! Anyone else I know would have been dead forty-eight hours ago. However——" He paused and stood in the firelight, for the weather had turned intensely cold, and both fireplaces were ablaze. "Charles," he began again slowly, after a moment, "what started it? This crisis, I mean. Have you and Aghassy been quarrelling?"

"We have been quarrelling," Thorn answered with a frown, "but *she* doesn't know it."

Hesketh's keen eyes snapped inquiry at him. "Sure? She's as clever as the Old Nick himself, you know; a wink to her is as good as a dozen nods to anyone else——"

"Well, you can judge for yourself." Thorn's voice was testy, for he had been under an extraordinarily severe nervous strain for days, and his nerves were shaken. "You've seen us together every day—did *you* think we were quarrelling?"

"I knew you were itching to be at his throat, but he seemed friendly towards you."

"Yes! It's another of these 'truces' of his. Upon my word, Arthur, I believe that Aunt Mary's illness has saved one of us from—well, from sudden death or—pretty well anything——"

The great doctor held up his hands to the blaze and rubbed them gently together. "I thought so," he murmured—"I thought so."

Then he added: "I think it would be a very good plan for you to go away for a while, Charles. I think it would be good for Lady Mary if you did."

Thorn's sad eyes stared into the fire for a moment. "I see what you mean, but—I ought to be here. Aghassy——"

"Aghassy is a great deal less dangerous to my patient than you are just now, my dear fellow! He may hate you, but he doesn't show it, and that ugly face of yours gives you away every minute."

"I know it does, but—— Look here, Arthur, suppose I don't go into her room at all? She can think I'm away, but—I don't want to leave the house just now——"

But when Hesketh had gone Thorn sat on by the fire thinking about what he had said.

Inarticulately, painfully miserable, he tried to marshal all the facts; to look them straight in the eyes; to see not only their outward, exoteric, but also their inward, occult meaning. Lady Mary apparently, so far as health went, was what is vulgarly known as being on her last legs; if her obscure but valuable life was to continue, Thorn knew from his glimpse through Hesketh's spectacles that the old lady must have perfect peace, perfect contentment of soul. . . . The flame crept along the length of the log in a smooth unbroken line, and then cascaded down the edge, burning up into a new brilliant fire and splintering into little

sparks of crimson glory. . . . There was Jimmy, too, to be considered; and, at the thought of the boy, Thorn looked up, rubbing his bony jaw with his bony left hand. *If* Jimmy went to the south of France with this seemingly satisfactory Brandon Roper, M.B., all would be well. Aghassy had given in, so far as the boy's own wishes were concerned; but Charles Thorn remembered the look in Aghassy's face as he had explained his attitude towards his stepson. If Jimmy had refused absolutely to go to the south of France with Mr. Roper, Aghassy had said, in so many words, he would not have felt justified in using his undoubted legal authority over the boy, and Thorn knew that this was only a polite and useful way of saying that his, and therefore Charles's, authority was bounded by certain definite limits. "If I insisted," Thorn thought, "on his going to Bordeaux, he would very probably influence Jimmy without any words to declare that he would not go; and then—where should I be?"

Lady Mary in the meantime, he reflected, like some smitten plant was slowly throwing out feeble shoots towards health and happiness. Thorn could not make out whether or not the old woman, so resolute, so clear-eyed as a rule, was, or was not, seeing through the romantic and illusory presentation of events offered to her by Aghassy. Things seemed better; Jimmy had agreed to go; Bruno, too, seemed more at ease—poor old Latin captive—than he had for a long time been; and even Drake appeared to have been purged, through her anxiety, of her most saliently unpleasant qualities. . . . And yet—and yet—Charles was anxious, and

all his tentacles drew back afraid of some sudden, unexpected, horrid attack. Thinking of all these things, he fell asleep in his chair, and woke hours later, chilled and stiff. At such times even Dawn, the rosy-fingered, can look to be a young woman of woe and evil omen.

* * * * *

The days passed in a dreadful monotony; nothing was happening; and somehow that was the very worst of all—that lack of action, that arrestation of events.

And yet Thorn knew that before long things would happen, direful things, with punishment more direful swift on its heels; and while he could not, in obedience to Arthur Hesketh's hint, leave Yellowleaf, yet, in his nervous disequilibrium, he felt that he could not remain there. His decision changed a dozen times in as many hours.

The house had become, the old quiet house behind its high walls, a place of terror, almost a place of horror to him, and at last his misery of mind grew such that one morning, girding up his loins, having reinforced himself with coffee and fried eggs and bacon, the wretchedly unhappy man went into Lady Mary's room, and announced to that stout-hearted old pilgrim that he had come to tell her that he was going away. "I've decided at last," he announced.

She was still very feeble, but her fine old eyes in their well-cut orbits glowed warmly as she looked up at him.

"Et tu, Brute!" she said in an undertone. "Thou, too, my dear!"

Thorn tried to laugh, but it was a lamentable cachinnation, mirthless and dry; a sound of rubbed-together husks, a sound of no mirth or merriness.

"Funk it, do you?" she asked drily.

"No, I don't, Aunt Mary—at least, I *do* funk seeing you so ill. Do you know," he went on, bending over her, "that I can remember, when I was a very, very little boy—a mere shrimp of a kid—your teaching me how important it was to wash just above my ears? Well, somehow to this day I always rub my finger on the soap and then just go for myself there between the topmost roots of my ears and the lowermost roots of the hairs of my head, and I think of you, dear Aunt Mary, I think of you—I *always* think of you."

"Charles," the old woman said suddenly, "you're going away, and without being a shocking liar I could not say that I was sorry; but tell me this, just because I'm a very old woman, tell me the real truth—will you?"

Charles looked at her with heavy eyes—eyes, in their setting of middle-aged lines, so much more tragic than the very saddest of young eyes. "I will tell you anything I can, Aunt Mary," he said.

She drew his big hand down to her pillow, and leaning over, made as if she were trying to make a little hollow with her chin in his palm. "How do you feel," she asked earnestly, "about Jinks?"

"Dear Aunt Mary—I'm beaten, clean beaten, by Jacques, and all the things that seem to have turned into accessories of his. He's so much cleverer than any of the rest of us that the only thing I feel to be

still on our side is the fact of Jimmy's youth. I can understand the Omnipotent Power being unkind to troublesome babies who yell for anger against them; or I can understand the annihilation of the over-ripe; the clawing down from their thrones of ruthless young climbers, or old usurpers——" After a pause he added: "What I *can't* understand is the deliberate blighting of blossoming youth——"

The old lady nodded, loosening one of her long white pigtails that had come to anchor on her shoulder, and casting it forth with a careless gesture. "That's a good phrase, Charles, 'blossoming youth.' You feel that the gods must help us about young Jimmy? Well then, so do I feel that they ought to, but—what are you and I, in view of that belief of ours, going to *do* about the child? He must be saved, but—how? Tell me that."

Thorn made a helpless gesture. "I'm sure *I* don't know. Thank God, he'll soon be off to——"

Lady Mary laughed softly, although her eyes were dark with anxiety. "Are you sure? From what that wily old serpent Bruno says, I really don't think that he *means* to go to Bordeaux."

Charles started. "Don't you?"

"No; you yourself heard Aghassy say that if Jimmy really objected to going he, Jacques, would not feel justified in forcing him to do so——"

"Yes, I heard that," Charles murmured; "but he *must* go. Why, he said he would—If he didn't," he added, frowning, "I don't see how on earth *I* could!"

Lady Mary stretched out her little white hand to the table where her different medicines stood. "I will have a dose," she said, "of my 'mich perilly' medicine, please, Charles—I'm feeling a little tired. That's just the point. If the child changes his mind—and Bruno insists that he's going to—Aghassy won't insist, and if *you* aren't here——"

Thorn took up the ominous-looking blue bottle and held it against the light. "Is it time for it?" he asked. "Ten drops, isn't it?"

"Yes, ten drops. Arthur Hesketh says that twelve or thirteen would kill me, and God knows," she added, "that, wicked old world as it is, I have no wish to leave it one hour sooner than I need!" She laughed, but she was very weak, and Charles, when he had given her the prescribed ten drops, knelt by her golden bed, with her poor, time-silvered head on his thrust-out arm, waiting for her agitated heart to quiet down before he left her.

"Are you all right now?" he asked her.

She nodded. "Yes, better, thanks. Now run along, Charles. I must try to get some sleep; and you go and see what you can find out from Jimmy, will you? Pump him." After a second, as he reached the door, she added: "Be sly, Charles, lead him on, make him talk. To the deuce with all scruples!"

III

That same evening Lady Mary, who for some time had been asleep, was roused by an unusual sound that, though it did not frighten, startled her. It was two

o'clock, she saw by the flickering night-light; she knew that Drake was asleep, and so could not imagine who could be up in the house at that hour. After a moment she heard something more, this time the soft closing of a door, so she rang for her maid and told her that someone was moving about in the passage. "Open the door and see who it is." But Drake, all forbidding though she was, happened to be a timid soul, and declared that she was afraid to leave the bedroom. Lady Mary glanced at her with contempt. Fear was practically unknown to her, and like all brave people, particularly brave women, she had no patience with cowards. "Nonsense!" she said. "It must be burglars."

"That's just what I'm afraid of, My Lady. Shall I ring for Bruno?"

But this the old woman would not hear of. "Don't be ridiculous. If you won't go, bring me my dressing-gown and my chair. I suppose you won't be afraid to push me across the floor?"

Drake implored her not to get up, almost threatening her with sudden death if she persisted in making such a journey; but Lady Mary's blood was up. She meant to know who was sneaking round her house at two o'clock in the morning, so a few moments later the indignant and terrified maid was propelling her across the drawing-room floor. The woman opened the door quietly, and then Lady Mary sent her back for her electric torch, after which, bidding her stay where she was, the old woman pushed herself forward, playing the light up and down the passage, which was empty, and as silent as the grave; and then, suddenly,

she knew where the noise had come from, for there was a light under the door of Aghassy's study. By some instinct that she did not even try to analyze, she bade the servant go back into the drawing-room and close the door. She wanted to open that door alone. She was not frightened, she was intensely interested; all the pleasures of the chase were raging in her old breast as with great skill she drew her chair alongside the door, and very gently turned the knob.

She was expecting to find Bruno's prophecy fulfilled regarding Miss Maréchal, and she had been right, but right in a way that brought such a blinding flash of understanding to her that she literally could not breathe for a moment. Miss Maréchal was there, her demureness all gone, her manner and voice such that no one could have been blind enough to misread them; but the face leaning through the clouds of cigarette-smoke across the table towards her was not the powerful, feline one she had expected—it was Jimmy's, flushed and stirred and very, very bad to look at. The latent evil against which Charles Thorn and she had been fighting their slowly losing battle had now the upper hand in the boy. The weaknesses that in a youth of his age can be, and often are, pathetic and forgivable, had lost their boyish aspect, and looked the bad, degrading weaknesses of a mature man. Neither of them had heard the quiet opening of the door; they were too busy with each other to look towards it. Then Jimmy spoke, and his voice was thick and blurred, and the old lady noticed that two glasses stood on the table beside them. If Lady Mary had been strong and well

at that moment she would have precipitated matters, and probably accomplished a crashing victory, but the ominous thumping of her heart forced her to leave the field. She knew that any great excitement might kill her, and she knew that she must be ready for action the next day. So very quietly she withdrew, and went back to the agitated, blue-nosed Drake, the very hairs of whose chin were quivering with terror. "It's all right," she said. "It's only Mr. Aghassy working at his music"; and she went back to bed.

And now she knew why Aghassy had had Miss Maréschal come to Yellowleaf, and she knew that her conviction, that Jimmy, when the time came, would refuse to go to the south of France, was correct.

Charles should not now go away. He should stay and help her in what she felt to be the greatest crisis in her life.

* * * * *

IV

The next morning she sent for Thorn and told him of her discovery. He, warned by Sir Arthur Hesketh, took it very quietly so far as words went, but she knew how deep and bitter his anger was.

"I mustn't talk much, Charles," she said. "Suppose you go for a walk and think it over, and I will think it over here, and then we will decide what to do, for we must act quickly."

Thorn nodded. "All right, Aunt Mary."

She tried to take his hand, but he drew it away, and she knew it was because he didn't wish her to know how ice-cold he had grown.

CHAPTER XXI

I

As soon as Thorn was out of the house Lady Mary rang for Bruno. He was surprised to find her looking much better and fuller of energy than she had been since her illness.

"Bruno," she said, "I've found out about Miss Maréchal. You were right, although she was not here to amuse *him*."

The old man stared, and looked puzzled. Then he answered slowly. "Eccellenza, you know best, but although I am only a servant and an ignorant man, I am a man, and I know that there's more in this than just the Symphony."

"I am going to send you for Mr. Aghassy in a moment," the old woman went on, paying no heed to his words. "I'm going to tell him what I've found out, and force him to get rid of Miss Maréchal and to get Master Jimmy off to France at once. Give me ten drops of my strong medicine, and don't tell anyone you have done it. I'm going to have a very tiring scene, and my heart must not stop in the middle of it."

"God forbid!" the old man murmured as he took the little bottle from its corner on the washstand, and, moistening its lip with the stopper, began very carefully measuring out the ten drops. When he had added the water to it he handed it to his mistress, and said thoughtfully, referring to her last speech:

"Master Jimmy—many excuses, Your Excellency—but I thought it was settled that Master Jimmy was to go on Friday? His Lordship said this morning that—that I had been wrong, and that he *was* going——"

"Yes, but that's just what I want to tell you. This Miss Maréschal is here to prevent his going!"

The old man fell back, his face working suddenly. "Holy Madonna! It cannot be! He, even *he* would not do such a thing as that. Our Master Jimmy, my Captain Jim's son, to be mixed up with that *canaglia!*"

Lady Mary shrugged her shoulders, about which was wrapped her ancient ermine cloak. "Yes, that's exactly what he is doing. If I hadn't been a fool, I would have seen it long ago." She had never seen the old servant so horrified, so indignant.

"It's worse than what he did to your little dog, isn't it?" she said kindly, with a feeling that he was too old, and worn away with his nearly half a century of service to her and hers, to be subjected to such a scene. But the old fellow's sense of proportion was unshattered.

"Eccellenza, my poor Risotto was only a dog after all. It's a human soul he's trying to destroy now——"

Lady Mary laughed, a grim little laugh full of limitless determination. "You needn't be afraid, my dear old friend. He will not succeed in this little plan. I've told His Lordship, and I wish you to go and ask Mr. Aghassy to come and speak to me. You will come, I know, the very instant I ring. When His Lordship comes in ask him to wait in the front drawing-room till I send you for him——"

A few minutes later Aghassy appeared spick and span, and healthy-looking, but with on his face a visible cloud of vexation; a cloud so visibly not affected that the old lady instantly suspected it of being assumed. When he had kissed her hand and sat down, after affectionate enquiries as to her night, he began, before she could speak, by saying hastily: "I've just had my first quarrel with Jimmy, and upon my word it's upset me more than I should have thought possible."

"With Jimmy?"

"Yes. You will remember his getting out of me the other day that if he positively refused to go with Roper, I should not feel justified in forcing him to? Well, an hour ago the young rascal came into my room and told me that he had decided quite definitely to stay here."

"Dear me!" murmured Lady Mary drily.

He had been looking out of the window, and at her tone gave her a short, sidelong glance without turning his head, one of his most cat-like tricks and one that she always detested.

"And you have tried to persuade him and failed?" she asked, suddenly controlling her voice, and speaking in an innocent way.

He nodded. "I have; I have done everything in my power and I have failed, and now I give up. Perhaps you and Charles can make him go—I'm not going to try any more. After all, he's only my stepson——"

Lady Mary could not remember afterwards what she had been on the point of answering, when the door opened and Bruno appeared, announcing the doctor.

Doctor Hesketh trotted in with a large bottle in either hand and a beaming smile on his thoughtful face. "Well, my dear Lady Mary," he burst out, "you look better this morning.—Good-morning, Aghassy.—And you will look better still when you've had a glass of this wine! It will do you more good than all the drugs in the world."

Aghassy had risen, and looked at the dusty bottles the doctor had put on the table, and his eyes lighted up. "By Jove!" he said, "where did you get that?"

"One of my patients, Lord Blauschwert, sent it to me last night. It's real Imperial Tokay, given to him by that old reprobate the Emperor of Austria. I have taken the liberty of asking Bruno to bring a corkscrew and some glasses, and we will drink to your health——"

"And the benevolent Blauschwert's," put in Lady Mary.

Bruno came in with a tray, and being warned on no account to shake the literally priceless bottles, he was allowed to open one, after which Sir Arthur poured out three glasses, and they each took one—bowing politely to each other in the old-fashioned way—and they sipped, and sipped again. Lady Mary felt her tired heart beat stronger and more steadily, and seemed to know that somehow or other Aghassy would be defeated in his plotting.

"By the way," Hesketh went on after a moment, when the panegyric of the generous wine had died away, "it's a good thing that young rascal, Jim, is off to France; I believe he's falling in love with that wicked little secretary of yours, Aghassy!"

Aghassy started, for once in his life genuinely betraying his feelings. "Nonsense, nonsense, my dear Sir Arthur. The boy's just nineteen, and the girl must be seven or eight and twenty."

"That may be. Boys of nineteen will fall in love with *someone*, as we all know, though we most of us refuse to admit it in the case of our own youngsters! At all events, I have just met them tearing down the St. John's Wood road in a taxi, very much engrossed in each other—very much indeed!"

Aghassy laughed, rising leisurely. "Perhaps that explains my trouble with him this morning," he said. "Lady Mary will tell you about it—I must get back to my work. I sent Miss Maréchal on an errand, and she will be back soon. I will warn her about the kid——"

He went out, and the two old friends were alone.

"When is Thorn going?" Hesketh asked, looking at his watch. "They're a dreadful pair of fellows to live in the house with, those two. You will be glad to have one of them away, even though it's Charles!"

Lady Mary laughed. "Yes, I shall be very glad to have one of them away," she confessed with a funny little nod, "but I am not quite sure which one it will be——"

Hesketh rose, having felt her pulse and told her to stay in bed another day or two. "Well, make it as soon as you can. Aghassy's not so bad when he's alone. He's certainly a wonderfully agreeable fellow! Charles has as bad an effect on him as he has on Charles, and I must say, to give the devil his due, that

I don't much wonder. That gloomy face of Charles's would get on *my* nerves, I'm sure." Humming under his breath, as was his way, the great doctor marched up the hall and let himself out into the dark January morning. At the gate he met Thorn coming in, and they stopped and shook hands.

"Lady Mary's much better this morning. You go and have a glass of that Tokay I brought her. It's magnificent stuff."

"Who gave it to her?" Charles asked suspiciously.

"I did, so you needn't worry about it's coming from Aghassy! Perfectly harmless, I assure you."

Thorn went on in, and was about to cross the hall to the drawing-room door when Aghassy came downstairs and joined him.

"Have you seen Jim this morning?" he asked.

"No," Thorn growled.

"Well, you had better see him when he comes in. He has changed his mind about going to France, and there's the deuce to pay."

Thorn did not speak, and after a minute Aghassy went on in a jibing voice: "I understand *you* have decided to leave us for a while?" Very devils of malice seemed dancing in his eyes, and Thorn drew back, biting his lips. There was something odd about Aghassy that morning. He seemed full of a triumph that he scarcely tried to conceal, and this surprised Thorn, and disconcerted him.

"I am not going," he brought out suddenly. "Since you have set that girl on Jimmy I feel that I am necessary here."

Aghassy laughed, spreading out his fingers with an absurd assumption of modesty. "My dear fellow," he cried, "you flatter me. I am a villain, on doubt, but I am not nearly such a *subtle* villain as you seem to think. If Jimmy's having a little flirtation with Pearl Maréschal, I don't know that it will hurt him. We all begin sooner or later. Even you, no doubt, had fancies before. . . ."

Thorn's face had gone perfectly white, and his great hands were clenching and unclenching uncontrollably; his mouth was set and he did not speak, but his deep breathing was very audible. Presently he moved away from Aghassy, and started slowly towards the stairs; but Aghassy followed him, for suddenly a corresponding rage, the dangerous, reasonless rage that springs, everything else aside, from a constitutional hatred, had gripped him, and his advance, soft-footed and noiseless, gave him the air of being about to spring at his enemy.

"I got home that time, didn't I?" he said quietly. "You tame cat! You feeder out of the hands of women!"

Thorn knocked him down, almost as surprised himself as his victim at what he had done. Before Aghassy could move, both men became aware that they were no longer alone. In the drawing-room door stood Drake, carrying the little tray with the three empty wine-glasses on it, and opposite her, a big silver cup in one hand and a piece of wash-leather in the other, was the green-aproned Bruno, regarding the scene with horrified eyes. There was a long pause,

and then Aghassy slowly rose, and Thorn saw that the deadly rage in his face was evenly balanced by a deadly triumph.

"Drake! Bruno!" he said in his voice at his softest, but perfectly steady. "You have seen this, and you will not be surprised when you hear that Lord Drax will be leaving Yellowleaf to-morrow."

Drake was about to answer when Bruno motioned her to be silent. "You and I are only servants," the old man said, drawing her across the shining old boards; "what our masters do is no concern of ours."

When the two men were alone, Thorn spoke. "I don't beg your pardon," he said. "I'm glad I knocked you down. I will go to-morrow, and I will take Jimmy with me."

"That, of course," Aghassy answered, "would make—*my wife*—extremely happy——"

II

Thorn sat upstairs in his room till after lunch-time, going through a struggle that left him limp and old-looking. The game was up now, and he must go. He couldn't take Jimmy away from his mother, yet how could he leave the boy to the insupportable machinations of his stepfather? His old aunt was very ill, and she loved him, and would grieve for him. There seemed to be no possible way out of the horrible tangle things had got into in the quiet old shut-away house. It was characteristic of the man that he gave very little thought to his own inevitable unhappiness in leaving Lily; his hopeless love for her was as much a part of

him as his long ugly nose, and he gave little conscious thought to either. Lily didn't love Aghassy; he knew that she never had loved the man; but as far as she was concerned she would be safer without Charles's presence than she was with it, because so long as Charles was in the house there would be danger of his irritating Aghassy into some hideous self-revelation. Over and over again these different thoughts toiled through the man's tired brain, and at last in his exhaustion, and unconscious hunger, he fell asleep on his low divan, and when he woke up the early winter dusk had come, and his room was dark. Last night Lady Mary had chanced on the scene in Aghassy's study; this morning Drake and Bruno chanced on the scene in the hall; and now, as he lay there miserable, impotent and chilly, he chanced on a scene himself.

His door was open, and exactly opposite it was the room occupied by Miss Maréschal; and presently he heard her coming upstairs, her high heels clicking, and go into her room, after turning on the light in the passage. He realized that she had probably come up to tidy herself for tea, which she always had in the study, by her own wish. For a moment a wild project of trying to bribe her to go occupied his mind. She would go, no doubt, for money, and he had plenty; but the world was full of Pearl Maréschals, and he realized that such a course would be merely absurd. The girl was singing now in her room as she moved about, and Thorn, whom the cheerful sound annoyed, was about to close the door when he heard very cautious, slow footsteps approaching from the front of the house, and

presently Jimmy came down the passage in his stocking-feet. Assuming his cousin's dark room to be empty, the boy looked hastily down the stairs and then, without knocking, scratched softly at Miss Maréchal's door, which was opened.

"Oh, you wretch!" she cried. "You mustn't come to my door. Only suppose somebody heard you!"

"Nobody's heard me. I say, I want you to go out with me to-night. A fellow I know belongs to that dancing-club in Piccadilly and I've fixed it up with him over the telephone to take us. He has a friend, a girl, and we're going to dine somewhere first and then go on to the dance."

Thorn noticed that the little pale face that in its workday garb was uninteresting, almost plain, was very attractive indeed now, sparkling with mischief and pleasure as she listened to Jimmy's plan. "I can't go—I couldn't get out. Besides, I don't think your mother would like you to go——"

Thorn's heart ached at the foolish, sly expression on the boy's face as he answered her. "You don't suppose I'm going to tell—anyone! I will tell Jacques, my stepfather, though; he will fix it up. He's not a bit of a prig. Will you come?"

She pretended to hesitate. "I've got to go down now, for that old Italian sneak will be bringing in my tea. Yes, of course, I'll come if Mr. Aghassy doesn't mind. I adore tangoing."

Jimmy nodded. "Do you, darling? We will have a rattling good dinner. I think, Pearl, you might give me a kiss——"

Thorn shut his eyes. There was no particular harm in a boy of nineteen kissing a girl of twenty-seven, but there was something in Miss Maréchal's manner that was extremely displeasing, and that she was corrupt and rather vile under her demure mask was quite as obvious. When Jimmy had stolen back to his room and the young woman had gone downstairs, Thorn closed his door and sat for a long time by his cold hearth wearily thinking once more.

III

At ten o'clock that night, as Lily sat by her mother-in-law reading aloud, there was a violent pull at the bell, and when the door was opened a confused sound of voices reached the two women.

"Who can that be?" Lady Mary asked.

Lily lay down the book and rose. "I'll go and see." She went down into the hall, and there, between two strange young men in evening dress, stood her son, hatless, deathly white, very, very drunk.

"I'm awfully sorry," the elder of the two youths said. "We dined together and then went on to Blake's to a dance, and we had some champagne, and quite suddenly he went to pieces."

Jimmy looked round in bemused fashion. "Where's Pearl?" he muttered. "I want to see Pearl."

Bruno, who stood in the doorway, came forward. "Signorina Lili," he said gently, "don't be frightened. It's all right. If these two gentlemen will help get him upstairs I can do everything."

Lily Aghassy felt, as the two strange men half-carried her son up the broad, shallow staircase, that she and her house were helplessly and eternally disgraced. She had been told nothing of the events of the last few days; she did not even realize whom the boy meant by "Pearl"; but she had been miserably unhappy for a long time now, and this seemed the culminating point. She followed the three upstairs and into Jim's room; and then she held out her hand to the elder and thanked him. "It's very kind of you to have brought him home," she said; "he's—he's not used to much wine, and I suppose a little goes to his head."

The younger stared at her. "A little! Well, we thought he was wonderful to carry all he did before he collapsed."

"Shut up, Bertie!" said the other one. "Come along, the others are waiting for us," and with awkward bows they followed Bruno downstairs. Then Bruno came back, and gently but ruthlessly shut Mrs. Aghassy out of the room.

"You need not be so horrified, Signorina," he said; "with respect speaking, it's foolish of you to look like that. Why, even Captain Jim used to do it once in a while when he was Master Jimmy's age."

Lily looked at him, her little face very white. "Oh, I know that; but you don't know, he—he lied to me. He said he was going to dine with Mr. Aghassy at the club and go to a play. Oh!" She gave a little cry. Jacques had lied to her, too. Jacques let Jimmy go out with these vicious-looking, unpleasant young men. She went slowly back to her room in misery so

great that any she had felt in all her life before seemed nothing compared to it. She was so alone. Jacques was against her; Lady Mary could not be told agitating things; and Charles even, her dear, good, faithful old cousin, was going away the next day—going, he had told her, simply because it would amuse him to see Morocco again. Feeling truly abandoned, the poor little woman shut herself into her bedroom to cry as if she could never stop. It was about half an hour later that, coming softly out of Jimmy's room where he lay in a heavy sleep, she came face to face with Thorn on his way upstairs.

In her misery she broke out again, crying angrily: "Oh, Charles, I think it's dreadful of you to go away and leave me now when everything is so horrible. I've never thought you were selfish before."

Thorn stood still, his arms folded, looking down at her with an impassive face. "Don't be a goose, Lily," he said quietly. "You're upset about Jimmy, of course. Bruno has told me. But you mustn't exaggerate——" Then he broke off short, for his alarm was greater than hers and he was a bad liar.

She came close to him, and got hold of his sleeve with both her little icy hands. "If you go away Jimmy will die," she said. "Jim, my big Jim, could not stand drink. You remember how Arthur Hesketh wouldn't let him touch a drop of anything for years before he died; and just look at Jimmy. A breath of wind would blow him away. Mamma is dying, and I've nobody in the world but you."

Poor Thorn felt something very like the bitterness of death as he loosened her fingers and drew back

against the wall. "Things will be better when I'm gone," he said. "Aghassy doesn't like me. I—I get on his nerves." And then to his horror she burst into violent crying, and sat covering her face with her hands like a child, and shaking from head to foot.

"Lily, don't! You mustn't cry like that. Aghassy will be—sterner with Jimmy when I'm gone. He won't give him his own way so much. Perhaps he does it partly to spite me."

She stopped crying and looked up at him, a dreadful knowledge in her face, which looked almost the face of an old woman.

"Charles," she said slowly. "I hate Jacques. He has ruined all my life. I hate him."

Thorn closed his eyes and leaned his head against the wall, afraid to move, afraid to speak, his self-control was nearly at an end, and he knew it. After a minute she went on, speaking with a queer kind of satisfaction in her freedom of speech. "Before he came, think how happy we were, just the children and mamma and you and I. I've tried not to hate him. I suppose you think it is silly, but it isn't; I don't know exactly what it is, but he ought to be hated." Then she added: "Oh, I wish he would die."

Thorn heard her walking quickly back to her room and closing the door, and then he went quietly downstairs and walked to the end of the passage, listening at Aghassy's door.

"That last movement—the Allegretto," he heard Aghassy's voice saying, "is very good, very good indeed." And then the voice sang over a bar or two of the merry music. Thorn knew from Bruno that Miss

Maréschal had not come in, and that Aghassy was alone.

He smiled grimly as he listened to the man happily congratulating himself on this of his undertakings as well.

After a moment he turned the knob softly and went in.

IV

Sir Arthur Hesketh came slowly out of the study about half-past ten next morning and crossed the drawing-room to Lady Mary's Corner. The old lady was up, in her chair. Thorn and Lily were sitting with her. Hesketh approached them, his lower lip thrust out thoughtfully, and he stood still before he spoke.

"He must have been dead," he said, "about nine hours." There was a long silence, and then Charles Thorn asked quietly: "Have you decided what was the cause of his death?"

"There's no doubt about that. Apoplexy—a clot. He was bending forward over his work. He was a very thick-necked man, too." He shrugged his shoulders. "It happened in that way."

Suddenly he darted forward and caught Mrs. Aghassy in his arms. "Look out! she's fainting," he said shortly. "Get some of that wine, Charles."

Thorn ran into the bedroom, and came back with some wine in his aunt's neglected tea-cup. In a few moments the danger was past.

"You will let me tell you, my dear," the doctor said, leaning down, and kissing the little widow, "how deeply sorry for you I am. Such a sudden death is always very dreadful for the survivors, but you must pin your mind on the fact that it's infinitely the easiest way out for the one who goes."

Lady Mary nodded. "Yes. There are worse things than dying suddenly, Arthur."

The doctor rose. "Thorn, you had better come with me and I'll tell you what must be done."

Thorn started. "You don't mean that there will have to be an inquest."

"No, no! I must make out my certificate and—well, come along. Lady Mary, I think you had better take some food, some biscuits and a glass of that wine; we cannot have you getting ill; and Lily, you will have to tell Jim, you know."

Lily nodded stonily. "Yes, I will have to tell Jim; he's still asleep."

The two men went away together, and the two women sat for a while hand-in-hand without speaking. At last the younger one said: "Mamma, I've something dreadful to tell you. I—I think it's my fault that Jacques is dead."

Lady Mary stared at her in almost comic surprise. "Your fault! What on earth do you mean?"

Lily looked up. "You will think me very wicked, but something happened last night—I won't tell you what—and I—I wished he would die."

"Nonsense! You didn't really wish it. You may have said so, or thought so. Everybody thinks or says such things once in a while; you mustn't be hysterical."

But Lily persisted. "I did mean it. I meant it so much that I said it to Charles. I—I ill-wished my husband," she continued steadily, "and he is dead."

The old woman drew herself up in her chair.

"Never say such a wicked thing again, Lily Dampierre," she said sternly. "Jacques is dead. God rest his soul! and for just this once I must tell you that it's my honest belief that it's the best thing for everyone that it has happened. Jimmy is now safe."

Lily looked at her. "Yes, that was what I meant last night about Jim—but think of poor Jacques, think of it, working quite happily on his Symphony, and dying like that all alone in the middle of the night."

"No matter how many people are with us, everybody always dies all alone, my dear," the old lady returned gently. "Now, will you ring? I don't want any wine, but we will have some tea while Charles is away, and then you must go and tell Jimmy."

Bruno brought the tea, moving about with downcast eyes and a deathly white face; and when Lily had gone upstairs on her sad errand to her son, the old servant looked up at his mistress, and stood as if waiting for her to speak.

"Bruno," she said presently, "how do you feel about Mr. Aghassy's death?"

The old man hesitated. "I am praying," he said, "for the repose of his poor soul; as for the rest, *Domeniddio* knows best."

Lady Mary nodded. "Yes, God knows best. I think," she added after a moment, "that some time when you have a few minutes' leisure you had better go and tell that poor Mrs. Cuthbertson."

"Yes, Your Excellency, I will," and he left her. And the old woman, all alone with her thoughts, sat looking over her idle hands into the fire for a long time.

CHAPTER XXII

I

ONE day about the middle of April, in the year of Jacques Aghassy's tragically sudden death, Lady Mary Dampierre was sitting in her wheel-chair in the glass gallery finishing the last corner of her great piece of embroidery. It was a beautiful bright day, and on the wide-spreading lawn through the windows an army of little crocuses stood boldly facing the really warm sun.

The old lady as she worked, more slowly than in the old days, glanced up now and again with pleased eyes, and gave her head a little nod as she saw the pretty, brave little harbingers. "Pretty dears!" she said aloud to herself, a new habit of hers. She had grown a good deal older in the last three months, although her eyes were as lustrous as ever, and even in the warmth of the gallery her famous old ermine cloak hung over her shoulders. Presently the door opened and Mrs. Aghassy came out, all in white but for a narrow black belt, which accentuated the smallness of her waist and made her look very young.

"They'll be here in a minute, darling," she said, "and I shall be glad to see her."

The old lady nodded. "Full of airs and graces the young minx will be, but Jimmy will soon knock that out of her."

The younger woman nodded in turn. "Yes. Jimmy and Charles between them. Poor old Picotee! She won't stand a chance."

Lily sat down, and in a minute went on in a different voice.

"Mamma," she said, "I wonder if poor Jacques knows how I feel about him now."

The old lady drew her needle through the canvas with a little jerk. "There's no reason why he shouldn't," she said, "although so far as I'm concerned, my dear, I could not swear there is any reason why he should."

"Because," the little widow went on, "I can't help being happy, and it seems very cruel, and I'm sure the greater part of my silly terror of him was unreasonable. After all, he certainly did love Jimmy, although—although——" her voice trailed away into silence.

The old woman looked up at her. "If I were you," she said, "my dear, I should give up thinking about those terrors of yours. They were justified, no doubt, to a certain extent, and; personally, I don't think Jacques was a good man; but at the same time he had his good points, and I think it would be better for you to weight your memory to those good points. Remember how he loved to give you little gifts; remember how Jimmy loved him; above all, my dear, remember how divinely he played the piano. No matter what he did or what he tried to do, there must have been something, if only a little, of God in his poor soul."

There was something oddly oracular in the old lady's way of speaking, and when she had ceased there was a long pause. Some of the sliding windows farther down the gallery were open, and through them came the sound of whistling—one of the gardeners was in a

merry mood. After a while Lily went on, laying her hand on her mother-in-law's as it lay on the taut canvas. "Mamma," she said, "how good you are, and how wise! Ever since I can remember you have helped me and strengthened me, and always when I've got into a silly scrape you got me out. Do you know," she added gently, "I even used to think, in the miserable days when poor, darling Jimmy was so dreadful, that if I told you more clearly how I felt about poor Jacques you would not have let me marry him."

Lady Mary's face was very serious as she answered. "Do you really look on your marriage with Jacques as a silly scrape?" she asked; and Aghassy's widow bowed her head. "Yes," she returned in the same tone of extreme gravity. "Yes, I do. It was the worst mistake I ever made in my life."

After a pause she went on more quietly: "That's why I don't feel that it was all poor Jacques's fault. He did love Jim, and I was an hysterical idiot when I thought—oh, those dreadful things. Charles told me I was a fool," she added simply.

"Oh!" hooted Lady Mary suddenly. "Charles, of course, is a most excellent judge of a fool. He's so wise himself."

Lily flushed, and she threw up her little chin with an angry air. "I don't understand, Mamma," she said, "how you can be so perfectly hateful about poor Charles. I think all of you are perfectly beastly about him. Bruno watches him as if he suspected him of having committed a murder; and as for Drake—oh, how I *do* dislike that woman, Mamma! I do wish you would get rid of her."

Lady Mary laughed. "She'll last my time, my dear," she said; "and if you say one word against my Bruno, our paths must diverge that same moment."

The clock struck at that moment. Both their faces changed. "Half-past twelve!" they exclaimed together. "Charles said they wouldn't be later than that."

There was a sound of the closing of a door, and of laughter and of footsteps, and out into the sunlight came peacocking a tall, broad-shouldered, slim-waisted, much mannered young minx in dark blue—Picotee home for good.

II

In his pantry, the next morning, Bruno sang softly to himself as he polished his silver. He was happy because Picotee had come back; because his old mistress was better, although so old, so old; because, on the contrary, she was growing visibly younger every day; because April was here.

"Di doman non cie certezza,"

he carolled, his beautiful pure voice pitched at a tone of the respect due to his mistress's house, and his own dignity as a trusted friend and butler.

"Of to-morrow no one is sure——"

As he ended on a high, soft note, the door opened and Drake came in.

"It's 'er Ladyship's time for her cocoa, Bruno," the woman said, eyeing him in an odd way.

"Yes, Miss Drake, it will be up in a moment——" and he eyed her in an odd way. An observer would

have been struck by the way these two old servants behaved when they were alone together. It was not so much that they were unfriendly as that they were wary, on their guard. Each might have been hiding a secret from the other, and yet at certain moments there seemed to be a tacit complicity between them.

Real friends as old servants, who for years have served the same masters, often grow to be, they were not! Drake, as a quite uneducated Englishwoman, naturally despised the courteous gentle old man, who loved good music and good pictures, and knew far more about the history of her own country, even, than she did. For Bruno was an "Eyetalian!"

And Bruno, on his side, had always been afflicted by the grim handmaiden's lack of beauty and femininity; and above all, the gross impurity of her vowels had always given real pain to his sensitive ear.

So if they now, in their old age, were drawn together in a singular way, it was not by sympathy.

"'Ow d'you think Miss Pickety is looking?" the woman asked as she waited for the cocoa.

"The Signorina Picotee is as lovely as a young angel," he answered, breathing on the handle of a fork, and rubbing it vigorously with his strong thumb in the way beloved of butlers. "Chepezzo!"

Drake's face softened. "Well, I wouldn't care to go *that* far, Mr. Bruno," she said; "there wasn't never much of the *angel* about Miss Pickety; but she is looking beautiful. 'Er Ladyship as pleased as a carrot half scraped to have her back——"

"Yes, *and* Mrs. Aghassy!"

With a self-important rumble the lift arrived at that moment with the cocoa, and the old man set it on the waiting tray.

Then he handed the tray to his companion, saying as he did so: "It is good to have them all laughing about the house, isn't it? The Signor Lord looks quite different. They came down early this morning as they used to, to 'kill the worm,' and His Lordship made coffee, and they were all as merry as birds——"

He eyed her closely as he spoke, and her cold eyes gazed back steadily at him.

"Poor *Master* would have been glad, too," she returned slowly, "if—if that hadn't 'appened."

"Yes. You mean if he had not died. God rest his soul——" Bruno crossed himself.

"Just so. Well, I'll be going." She moved slowly away and for a minute the old man stood deep in thought.

Just before he sounded the luncheon gong he went up to Thorn's room, and, being told to come in, opened the door quietly and stood on the threshold.

Thorn, who was writing, looked up. "Hullo, Bruno," he cried kindly. "What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing, My Lord. I—I just thought that perhaps you might allow me—con rispetto parlando—ask Your Lordship a question——"

It struck Thorn that the old fellow looked very old, almost broken, as the clear spring light fell on his face, and so bade him sit down. But Bruno, with a little gesture, remained standing. After a moment he

broke out, in a voice that trembled a little: "Signor Carlo—when are you going away?"

"When am I going? I don't know. Her Ladyship and—the children don't want me to go. You know we shall all be at Oving-Wellow for the summer——"

"But—I thought Your Lordship intended to go to Paris——"

"My Lordship intended to go to Norway for the summer," Thorn returned good-humouredly; "but, as I say, Her Ladyship wants me to stay——"

Suddenly Bruno went to the window, and, leaning his forehead against the glass, burst out in Italian. "Oh, Signor Carlo, Signor mio piccolo Carletto, go—go—for God's sake go!"

There was a long pause, and then Thorn answered quietly: "Bruno, what is the matter? For a long time I have known that you were—troubled, and—I—I have felt that something was in the air—— Tell me what it is."

Bruno turned his face, very white, the lines in it looking as if they had just been drawn in charcoal. "Your Lordship," he said gravely, "I beg you not to ask me, I know the respect I owe you, and with—respect speaking—I love you——"

Thorn's face was as white as Bruno's, and full of something very like fear; but his voice was steady. "Have you heard a story that is being hinted, that—that poor Mr. Aghassy's death—was not natural?"

Bruno gazed at him in miserable silence, and after a moment bowed his head.

There was a pause, and then Thorn rose. "And hearing this rumour, you think that—that I had better leave England."

Bruno bowed his head and stood there, his chin touching his faithful old breast, without speaking.

It seemed to him very long before Thorn's voice broke the silence by saying quietly: "Perhaps you are right, old friend. Now tell me just how far this—this talk has gone——"

The talk, it seemed, was very vague as yet. Drake had evidently heard it; and cook had, plainly, something in her mind. "And then, the other day," Bruno went on painfully, "friend of mine, a pastry-cook told me that he had heard it——"

Thorn nodded. "Well, Bruno, I'll think it over; it—it may be better for me to go, and I thank you for telling me all this. You ever-good friend——." He held out his hand, but the old man seemed not to see it, and Thorn went on: "I will not pretend to think, even to you, that the world is not a better place without that monster——"

"Yes, My Lord, he was a monster, God rest his soul——" As the old man reached the door, Thorn called him sharply: "Bruno!"

"My Lord?"

"You—you don't think Lady Mary knows anything of this—suspicion?"

"Oh no, the Madonna forbid *that!*"

"Yes. She must have an idea. I—as you know, she is used to the idea that I *wished* to leave for a while—she will not be surprised if I do go—— I'm

not yet quite sure that it will be wise to do so—it looks—as if I had something to hide, you know.”

“I think it would be better. Oh, Signor Carlo, you must, you *must!*”

As he spoke Jimmy came racing up the stairs, bellying in dissonance a popular air. “Hullo, Bruno,” he cried, on looking into the room, “you’re *here*, are you! Where’s lunch, you old villain!”

Bruno went down and the boy and Charles followed him, Jim hanging to Thorn’s arm in his old way.

His stepfather’s sudden death had been a terrible shock to the delicate youth, and for a fortnight he had been ill in bed with its effects; but his mother’s devoted nursing, his thorough rest, and the natural healing of his years had pulled him round, and he was now far on the way to complete recovery.

Miss Pearl Maréchal had disappeared the day of Aghassy’s death, and never been heard of since, and young Jim was shrewd enough to realize that this disappearance was a confession of some kind of guilt, though he had never connected it with Aghassy.

The woman had stirred him, but the moment she was gone, and his young nature no longer subjected to her forcing power, it naturally went back to its former conditions of normal growth.

“We shall soon have the pleasure,” Lady Mary assured his mother one day, “of beholding our young man in love with some mature and respectable beauty of our own world. Helen Blois would do admirably, she’s forty, or Adelaide Morton——”

Meantime Lily Aghassy was as happy as the day

was long. She had her own Jimmy back, and he was a lamb in the matter of tonics and milk; he was blissfully painting some very remarkable pictures that required translation, so abstruse and modern were they; Lady Mary was better and full of a kind of high serenity—God was indeed in his heaven!

That afternoon Thorn got Jim and Picotee off to a *matinée*, and then went to see Lady Mary. She was still sitting in the glass gallery working at her *métier*, and looked up at him with a smile.

“Well, Charles,” she said, “so I was right and you *do* want to have a talk with me!”

“How did you know?”

“Am I not a very intelligent old woman, my dear? And besides,” she added more gravely, “your thought was father to my wish. I want to have a talk with you.”

He sat down, and for a moment watched her needle as it crept delicately about a big golden geometrical figure on her canvas. Then he said, looking out across the sunshiny lawn: “Well, Aunt Mary?”

She went on working, but answered at once: “Are you—are you going to Norway, Lord Drax?”

“That’s just the point. I—I should very much like to go——”

“That is a lie. You don’t want to go; you are more nearly happy just now than you ever have been in your poor disappointed life. But—for some reason you are beginning, quite lately, to think you ought to go!”

His face changed, paling suddenly. “You persist

in ignoring the charms of trout fishing in Norway, my dear old woman," he murmured.

"And you want to believe to ignore the charms of domesticity at Oving-Wellow. No, no, my dear, it won't do, and I'm going to worm your real reason out of you—or Bruno—or die in the attempt!"

Thorn started, as if she had, by naming Bruno, sent a bullet into him.

"Bruno is—growing very old," he said hastily, "he is beginning, as he himself would say of anyone else, to have crickets in his head."

"This isn't a cricket! Listen, Charles, I am very old and pretty well done for, as you know. During the last years I have been much more unhappy than you knew, and now I am happy. Don't you think you might stand by until I'm out of the way? I—I love you, you know——"

His voice shook, and something in her whole aspect smote him to the heart.

Leaning towards her, he took her little thin hand and kissed it. "Dear Aunt Mary," he murmured. "I love you, too—I can't express myself well, as you know; but——"

Then she looked at him, and he saw that her lustrous old eyes were brimming. His suffering at that moment was intense.

"Of course," she went on, "I know why you want to go and hermitize again. I know why, and I tell you you are being a perfect fool about it."

Thorn stared. "You know—I mean——"

"Of course, I do! Why, even Picotee knows!

Lily is the only one who doesn't. And I suppose you are planning a dreadful year of perfectly unnecessary suffering for yourself, to say nothing of me, all because of this idiotic conventionality of yours!"

He had risen as she spoke, and now stood at the top of the steps looking down to the lawn.

In the sunlight the little fountain's waters glittered gaily, and he thought of the still moonlight night when Lily had come to him with Aghassy's cablegram.

"She is as puzzled and hurt as I am, what's more," the old woman went on, "and Jimmy is disgusted. I tell you, Charles, you *mustn't* go!"

He turned, driven to bay at last. "Aunt Mary," he contradicted her earnestly, "I *must*."

"Then I swear that if you do, I'll tell her!"

"Great God!—you couldn't!" he almost screamed, and her amazement was so great that she dropped her needle.

"My dear boy, what on earth is wrong with *your* nerves! I will, though—I'll tell her the plain truth; and I can assure you a woman is never pleased by too great delicacy in the men who love them!"

The calm came back to his face and he gave a little laugh. "Lily knows I love her," he said simply. "She's known a long time now——"

Lady Mary flushed with indignation. "The little beggar! The little hussy, never to tell me! Well then, if she *knows*, there's no earthly reason for your running away from her!"

Thorn looked down at the oiled brick floor. "I'd enjoy some fishing——" he murmured.

As he made the feeble rejoinder Bruno appeared with a card on a tray.

Lady Mary looked at the card. "Never heard of the woman," she said. "Who is she?"

Bruno shot a look at Thorn. "She—she used to be Mrs. Cussberson, Your Excellency——"

Thorn started. "That—that poor soul—— Don't see her, Aunt Mary. I—I want to talk to you——"

Lady Mary looked at them both very sharply.

"Ask Mrs.—Mrs. Piper—to come out here," she said to the butler.

Mrs. Wolf Piper, a very prosperous-looking lady in smart clothes, spoilt by a white ostrich-feather boa, was, like many people, much less attractive and sympathetic in the full blast of success than she was in her darker days.

However, she had a real blush for Thorn, and thanked Lady Mary warmly for having invited her to the funeral.

"I took it very kindly of Your Ladyship," she said; "I was glad to come—poor Jacks! I'd have called before, only I've been away." After a moment she added, her accent contrasting oddly to her really fine face: "As a matter of fact, we've been away on our honeymoon, Mr. Piper and me!"

"I trust Mr. Piper is as well as you look," put in Thorn. "Remember me to him, will you, Mrs. Piper?"

"I will indeed, Lord Drax. And—I wonder now if you'd mind me having a little chat alone with Lady Mary?"

Thorn was nonplussed and distressed. "My Aunt is not very strong, you know," he faltered, but Lady Mary of course cut him short, and bade him be off.

"Mrs. Piper and I are old acquaintances," she said pleasantly; "you needn't fear her upsetting me——"

When he had gone Mrs. Piper's manner changed, and her face became grave. "I—I've heard the hateful stories that are going about," she said, "Wolf and I have. And of course we don't believe them, but even if we did——"

"May I ask what stories you mean?" Lady Mary glanced at her kindly over her big spectacles, and then carefully selected a shade of silk.

"Why—why, don't you *know*?" Mrs. Piper asked in visible confusion. "I thought you must know——"

"I haven't an idea, so suppose you tell me."

But Mrs. Piper did not wish to tell; she had assumed that Lady Mary must have heard the silly talk, though of course Wolf and she hadn't believed it, and he thought the book ought to be given to Her Ladyship—"The book proving so clearly, Wolf says, that if he *did* do it, it couldn't h'brought in more than just—justifiable——"

She broke off suddenly in great alarm, for her hearer's face had turned a dreadful greyish white, and she was leaning back gasping for breath.

"Oh, My Lady, whatever have I done! I'll go and call that old man——" The poor, big, helpless thing fluttered heavily towards the door, when Lady Mary's voice arrested her.

"Sit down. And—go on."

Mrs. Wolf Piper obeyed, and Lady Mary Dampierre heard for the first time that there was a growing suspicion that Jacques Aghassy's death had not been a natural one, and that Charles Thorn was vaguely, but with growing conviction, suspected of having murdered him.

The blow was a frightful one, but the brave old woman rallied after a moment and took up her needle.

"I don't suppose any responsible person would believe such rubbish," she said at length. "Sir Arthur Hesketh never hesitated for a second as to the cause of death——"

"That's what Wolf always says; but—there was a piece in *John Bull* about it last week, and—and we—I thought I'd bring you the book! Oh," she went on, in answer to a look of inquiry from the old lady, "it's a kind of diary *he* used to keep. He always wrote all his plans down—even his worst ones—sometimes." She shuddered. "He used to read bits to me. Sometimes, I don't believe he was really sane, Lady Mary. Something too inhuman about him, there was! Well, I found the book the other day among his papers and so on, and—and—here it is. There's a lot in it about—about young Mr. Dampierre——"

From her bag she took a small, green leather notebook, stamped all over with golden bees, and locked with a little gilt key.

"It—it's an awful book," Mrs. Piper said, as she handed it to Lady Mary. "You won't let anyone else see it, except Lord Drax, will you?"

Lady Mary put the book in her velvet bag. "You must trust me to use it as I think best," she answered quietly. "I thank you very much for it, and will send it back to you by Bruno."

Mrs. Piper shuddered. "Oh no!" she protested nervously. "I don't want ever to see the thing again, and no more does Mr. Piper! We want to forget all about Jacks. He's adopting Theodore, and he's to be called Piper. It's better, don't you think so?"

When she was gone Lady Mary rang for Charles. His blanched face moved her to indignant sympathy. "Poor little woman!" she exclaimed adroitly. "She's been consulting me about Mr. Wolf Piper—*what* a name!—adopting the child. Theodore is becoming a Piper himself. I advised her to do so by all means——"

Thorn heaved a deep sigh, and a little while later went and told Bruno that it was all right. "She hasn't mentioned—*that*," he said; "it was only about the child."

"Thank God! Mr. Charles, if there's going to be trouble for you——"

"Which there is," Charles said quietly.

"I'm afraid so, My Lord. Well, if there is—I almost wish it would please the good God to take her away first——"

III

Two days later Mrs. Aghassy and her children, by Lady Mary's request, went down to Oving-Wellow to get things ready for the summer. And Thorn, who was going to the Continent shortly, was to take the

old lady and Drake and Bruno down the following afternoon.

Lady Mary kissed the children good-bye, and embraced her daughter-in-law very tenderly.

"Dearest Lily," she said, "you look so happy!"

"I am happy, Mamma. Only I wish Charles would give up Norway—it is tiresome of him to go away this first summer——" She broke off with a blush, aghast at her stupid speech. Lady Mary laughed.

"He hasn't gone yet," she cried gaily, "and somehow I don't think he will go—if you ask him very prettily to stay!"

Again Lily blushed, and the astute Picotee burst out laughing. "Oh, Jinks," the girl cried, pointing at her mother, "just *look* at her! Imagine blushing like that about old Charles!"

Lily tossed her head, saying: "Be quiet, Picotee; how ridiculous you are! And besides——"

So they went off all gay and cheery, and Lady Mary told Drake that she was really glad to be alone for a bit. "I'm a very tired old lady, Drake," she explained.

Drake, whose manner the last day or two had been one of badly repressed excitement, looked at her old mistress with unusual gentleness.

"My Lady," she asked suddenly, "excuse me, but there's a lot of talk in the servants' 'all about 'Is Lordship and—and Mrs. Aghassy. I—I never was one to take liberties, but—oh, My Lady, Mrs. Aghassy *wouldn't* marry 'Is Lordship, would she?"

Drake afterwards said that when she had asked her question she was so frightened that she nearly dropped

down dead. "Fancy me having the cheek to ask Her Ladyship such a question! I thought she was going to skin me alive, but she didn't, and somehow that scared me more than if she *'ad*; there was something quite 'orrid and frightening in the way she looked at me, quite gentle and kind. 'Drake,' she says, 'you've got a bee in your bonnet, you silly old fool,' she says, 'and you must get it out. If Mrs. Aghassy could see her way to marry His Lordship—though it's no business of yours or mine—my dear'—mind yer, I've lived with Her Ladyship for over twenty years, and it is the first time she ever called me 'my dear'—'it would be a jolly good thing, it'd be a fine thing,' she says; then after a minute, she says to me: 'Drake, do you know that it is a great sin to accuse people of things, even in your own mind, when you're not perfectly sure?' "

* * * * *

Lady Mary and Charles Thorn dined together that night, and thoroughly enjoyed each other's company. There was at the back of both their minds the most dreadful thought that can be in the human brain, and the outlook seemed pretty hopeless, but old Bruno, as he padded softly about, serving them, watching the two people he so deeply loved, noticed with joy that they had put care and worry aside for a while, and were having a rest. Lady Mary once in a while spoke of the others down at Oving-Wellow, and Bruno gathered, on coming into the room rather suddenly once, that the old lady had been chaffing the grim-faced man with the sorrowful eyes in a way that made

him a little happier. It was a very pleasant evening; a big bunch of violets in a glass bowl on the table had been sent up from Drax, and Charles talked lovingly about his little grey castle down in Sussex. "You ought to drive over there one day in the car," the old lady said to him, "and take Lily and the children; they haven't been there for years——"

Thorn didn't answer this, and Bruno, alone in his pantry, nodded to himself over the omission! "He's made them all happy," the old fellow thought sorrowfully, "and now he's got to go away and leave them." There is no doubt at all that Bruno was by far the least happy of the three friends in the Yellowleaf dining-room that night. Lady Mary declared that she was in a wicked mood and wanted some champagne, and Bruno without a word opened the bottle in the pantry, and brought it, boiling over the edge.

Lady Mary and Charles made no remark about this, but each of them remembered that Aghassy had always opened champagne himself at the table, and they knew why the old butler had drawn the cork in the pantry.

"Aunt Mary," Thorn said, holding up his glass, "my dearest love and gratitude to you for all your kindness to me, all through my life. I'm a dull dog, but God knows my life would have been much lonelier and sadder but for your affection and—sympathy."

Lady Mary looked at him, her eyes glowing like lamps. "And my love to you. Propheying is a bad job, but I feel pretty sure that your worst times are over. I know a few things I might tell you, if I wanted to—but I'm not going to, because there are certain

things every man ought to have the brain to see for himself. You know yourself what sad, weary work waiting is, so—don't keep other people waiting too long."

Bruno felt, as he watched Thorn's face, that the pantry was the only place for an emotional old fool like him, and he hurried away, not daring to let his face be seen. After dinner Lady Mary settled herself in her Corner, and had her embroidery-frame put in its place before her.

"Hullo!" Thorn exclaimed, looking down at it, as he stood smoking, "you've almost finished!"

She nodded. "Yes, Charles, I've almost finished." After a minute she added: "Half an hour's work will do it. I want to get it done to-night."

"Oh, you don't want to take it with you?"

Lady Mary gave him a queer little glance. "Oh dear, no. What would be the use of it there?"

"I shall miss it, though, Aunt Mary," he said thoughtfully. "I've always loved to see you embroidering. What's it going to be, by the way?"

"It's going to be," she answered, her eyes dancing with delighted mischief, "a wedding-present; and wild horses won't drag out of me for whom, so there's no use your asking me."

Thorn rose, and walked up and down. "How very still it seems!" he said. "I'm sure this is the quietest house in London."

"Yes. It is very quiet. I shall miss it."

"But you love Oving-Wellow, don't you? And besides, you'll be back here soon——"

She nodded. "Yes, I don't mean to stay away long. And now I know you want to go and hear the last of Boris. I'll embroider for a little while, and then, like the good little girl in the rhyme, finish my work, fold it tight, and say, 'dear work, good-night, good-night.'"

Thorn kissed her, for he loved her very much that evening. He loved her bravery, her strength, her high-heartedness. "Remember," he said at the door, "you must be ready to go at eleven."

She assured him that she had not forgotten, and he left her. He was very fond of the Russian Opera, and Schaliapin was at his most stupendous that night; but it was with a very divided mind that Thorn sat in his stall, his eyes fixed on the stage. Once somebody in the row behind him leaned forward and touched him on the shoulder, and he started so violently that the man, with a laugh, cried: "My dear Drax, you jumped as if you thought you were being arrested!"

Thorn's face went perfectly white, and the other man, who knew and dreaded his terrible temper, hastily apologized and let him alone for the rest of the evening. It was a fine night, and Thorn walked all the way home to St. John's Wood.

As he opened the garden gate with his key, a small dark figure stumbled and wavered towards him in the gloom. It was Bruno, and at the sight of him Thorn stood still.

"Fool that I am," he said, "to have left her! She is dead."

And Bruno burst out crying, the wild, dry, rending

sobs of old age. Thorn held him in his arms as if he had been a child, and together they staggered up the path to the house. The door was open, and Thorn noticed that the garden door, too, at the end of the long passage, was wide. Without a word he went into the drawing-room, and walked quietly down and round the corner.

Lady Mary was sitting there: her hands, the thimble still on her finger, folded on the embroidery-frame; the needle, still containing a scrap of blue silk, sticking up where she had taken the last stitch. Her work was complete, and she was dead.

CHAPTER XXIII

WEEKS later a cab drove up to the pleasant old door of Oving-Wellow, and a very, very old man, accompanied by a cheerful-faced trained nurse, got out and went into the house.

"His Lordship will see me," the old man said to the country footman. "Go and tell him it's Bruno."

Five minutes later Charles Thorn and Bruno were closeted in the late Lord Hainaults' study. Thorn sent for biscuits and wine, and talked very kindly to his old friend, whose handsome face was a little distorted on one side. "But you will stay here with us; Bruno," he said persuasively. "We can't lose *you*; Mrs. Aghassy would be broken-hearted if you went away——"

The old man shook his head, and sipped his wine with the air of a connoisseur. "Ah, no, Mr. Charles—*tanti scusi*—Your Lordship. La Signorina Lili, I shall never call her by—that other name again—will not mind. She has the children—I should say the young lady and gentleman; and then she also will have, with respect speaking, you."

Thorn drew a deep breath. "You were such a good friend to us all," he answered sadly, "that I don't mind telling you that I believe that *that*—you know what I mean—might have come to pass in time, if it hadn't been for—the other thing. I shan't have to go abroad now, but——" he broke off.

Over Bruno's wasted, distorted face crept a blush, and his eyes, so like those of certain golden-eyed dogs, filled with tears.

"Mr. Charles," he said earnestly, "that danger is over."

"No, not over. Sir Arthur Hesketh settled Drake, and some of the tradespeople in the neighbourhood who had been chattering; but the story will crop up again, and then——" he shrugged his shoulders despondently.

Then Bruno unbuttoned his jacket and took from his pocket a flat package, tied with a curious twist of floss of silk of a dozen different colours. "I tied them up," he said, "with some of her embroidery silk after I had read mine——" He then produced two letters, and a small green leather book sprinkled over with golden bees. "This is what," he said, "I found under My Lady's good, brave hands when she was dead."

Thorn first read the letter addressed to the old man. It was beautifully written on Lady Mary's favourite grey notepaper, with the name and address of the house in the corner. And this is what it said, in Italian:

"MY DEAR, GOOD, AND FAITHFUL OLD BRUNO,

"You're such a pack of noodles, that you're all of you suspecting Signor Charles of having committed justice on that vile, monstrous man. You think he did it. Drake thinks he did. Poor Mrs. Piper lied nobly, but she, too, suspects him; so the time has come for me to own up. I killed Mr. Aghassy, and I'm glad I did.

Take this letter to Sir Arthur Hesketh, and tell him to remember the days when he was young, and to use his influence to stop this silly talk about Marion Hainaults' son. As for me, my time is nearly up anyhow, and I am going to take twenty drops of my famous heart medicine. I need not tell you that all these things are secrets; I trust you as I trust myself. I have left you a little money, and I want you to go back to Italy to finish your days, and I should like you to pray for me sometimes. I know you will always remember me.

“Your grateful and affectionate friend,
“MARY CATHERINE DAMPIERRE.”

Thorn laid down the letter, and hid his mouth with his hand for a moment. “Why didn’t you show this at the time?” he asked, without reproach. Bruno shrugged his shoulders.

“What would have been the good! One grief is enough at a time for any man. I took the letter to Sir Arthur, and he says no one shall ever know.”

Thorn then opened the letter addressed to himself. Although it was towards the end of May it was very cold, and a big log-fire blazed on the stone hearth. Bruno, after one glance at the other man’s face, changed his seat, sitting down by the fire with his back to the room. Thorn’s letter was longer than the one to Bruno. It told him that she knew that he knew that she had done it. “My poor Charles,” went on the clear, characteristic writing, “every time you looked at me it was in your eyes, and I longed to tell you that

you needn't pity me! When you have looked at this book that poor Mrs. Wolf Piper brought me that day, you will know how I have grown steadily gladder that I had the courage to do it. When you have read the book, burn it. After you left him that night I, having told Drake that I would sit in that chair for a while because I was breathing very badly, went to his room, and asked him to bring over the other bottle of wine that Arthur Hesketh gave me. I had already put into it the rest of my heart tonic. You remember that I got another bottle of medicine the next day, pretending to have upset that one? He was in a terrible rage against you, so vile, so deadly, and so full of power to do ill, that I felt no more pity for him than I would have felt in crushing some poisonous snake. I told him about the book, and that I had read it. But he only laughed. And I knew that he would try to bribe me to give it back to him, and he did. He threatened to sue for divorce, with you as co-respondent. He was perfectly frank with me; he seemed to gloat over the dreadful things that he told me about himself. He was a genius of evil; and then, when he had drunk enough and was very sleepy, I took my wine-bottle and went back to my room, pushing my chair myself, for I didn't want him dying in the drawing-room! I threw away the rest of the wine, washed the bottle, and went to bed. And that's all. If nothing had happened I shouldn't have ended my own life, for I have been very happy lately; but I couldn't have you galloping off across the world to change your name and live in obscurity, accepting the blame here for what I had

done. You are now at the Russian Opera, and I am all alone here; and I suppose I ought to be frightened, but I'm not. I am just very, very old, and very tired. You will never tell Lily or anyone else what I did, for it would hurt them to know. But you had better give this letter to Arthur Hesketh, to keep in case of need. Good-bye, my dear boy. As I told you to-night, I have finished my work.

Your very affectionate Aunt,

“M. C. D.”

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It had grown darker, the firelight danced merrily up the old walls and across the polished floors. In the big chair in front of the fire the good old friend sat motionless; his regular breathing reached Thorn's ear. The dreadful little book lay on the table, and he picked it up and opened it, and read a few words; then he dropped it as if he had touched something venomous. For a long time he sat there, and then very quietly went to the fire and dropped the book between the blazing logs. Then he went to the window and stood looking out. The sky was very clear, and just over a big stone pine, which was one of the glories of the place, the evening star glowed steadily. Thorn's sad, ugly face softened as he looked out into the hopeful spring evening; and then it melted into a smile, and very quietly he opened the widow. Far off across the lawn three people were walking, close-linked, towards the house, and as they got nearer his eyes filled with tears that did not hurt, as he heard the sound of a woman's happy laugh.







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